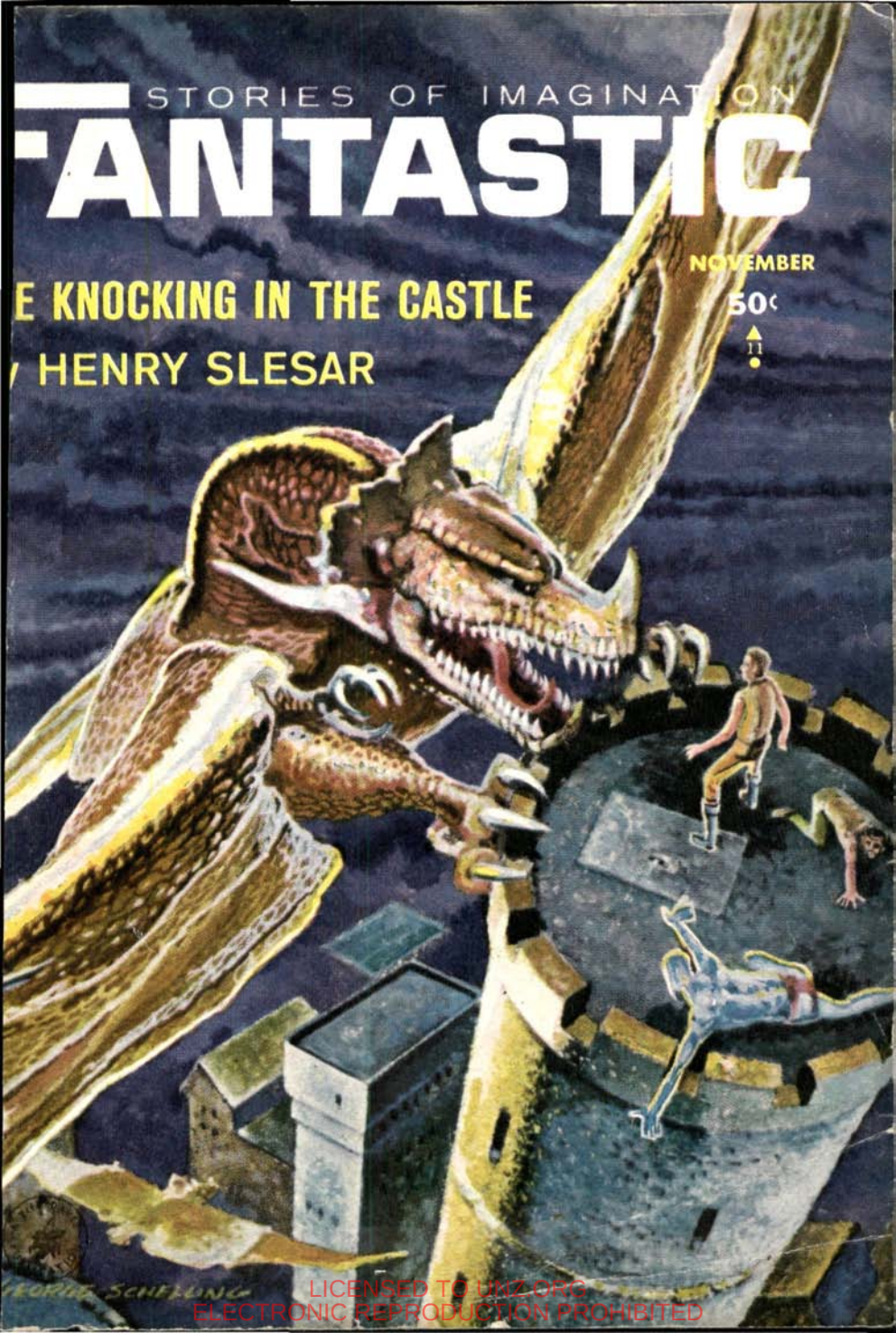

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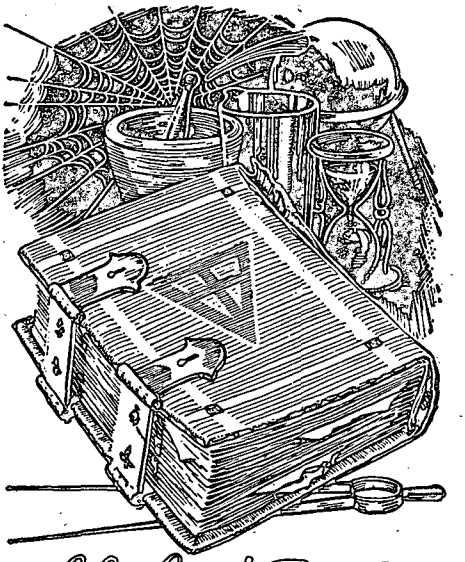

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STORIES OF IMAGINATION
FANTASTIC
NOVEMBER 1964
Volume 13 Number 11

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF

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Cover: George Schelling

Illustrating *Seed of Eloraspon*

SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE: All subscription correspondence should be addressed to FANTASTIC, Circulation Department, 434 South Wabash Avenue, Chicago, Illinois. Please allow at least six weeks for change of address. Include your old address, as well as new—enclosing if possible an address label from a recent issue.

EDITORIAL CONTRIBUTIONS must be accompanied by return postage and will be handled with reasonable care; however publisher assumes no responsibility for return or safety of art work, photographs or manuscripts.

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THREE scientists at the Carnegie Institution have performed a remarkable series of experiments which may lead to a long-desired goal: the quantitative study of evolution. What this means, exactly, is that for the first time science can make it possible to study with exquisite precision just how closely or how distantly different organisms may be related on the great time-scale of evolution.

The technique itself grows out of the fact the basic material of heredity—the DNA molecule—is composed of two combined strands. They can be separated, however, by the action of heat. And by bringing together single DNA strands from different organisms or different species, scientists provide the opportunity for these strands to combine.

Obviously the chances of any combination are better for those DNA types which have the greatest similarity, and least good for the most dissimilar. Thus, simply by toting up the relative frequency with which strands combine, scientists can get a rough picture of how closely the DNA of varying species resembles one another. From this it is a simple step to get the same data on the evolutionary relationship of varying species.

Early experimental results have indicated that human DNA combines with relatively high frequency with the DNA of rhesus monkeys, less often with mouse DNA, quite rarely with salmon DNA. On the other hand, mouse DNA hooks up very nicely with DNA from rats and hamsters, and very seldom with monkey DNA.

Of course, all of these early results fit in neatly with our preconceptions and our present knowledge. But what is most interesting about the experiments is the promise they hold of opening our minds—on the basis of scientific fact—to relationships which are now only theoretical, or even the stuff on which dreams are made. In short, eventually we should know a great deal more about relationships among the species that stand in different positions on the evolutionary ladder of life.

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SOONER or later, if you were a guest of the Davanzatis, at the frenzied apex of an evening or as an escape from apathy, Mike Davanzati would organize an adventure to the castle of Adriani. The women would scream in delighted horror at the suggestion, and the men would grin foolishly and wonder if they were sober (or drunk) enough for the experience. There would be a hurried gathering of coats and hats and the quick gulping of unfinished drinks, and most of all, there would be excited speculation as to whether or not, this time, they would hear the legendary knocking which had made the Adriani ruins a notable tourist attraction in an otherwise featureless portion of the Italian landscape.

When Tom Sedgeman brought Louisa Brown to the Davanzati houseparty, he was unaware of this penchant for castle-crashing. He had met Louisa only the week before, on the steps of the Piazza di Spagna. At first, he believed he was making a casual pickup of some local beauty: Louisa had skin like florentine marble and a helmet of black hair worn in a style then in vogue among the women of Rome. Then he learned that she was American; that she was widowed; that she was older than he was. The fact didn't discourage him, but it made him circumspect.

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Not long ago, two writers turned in, simultaneously, stories about elixirs-of-immortality. We thought that readers would be interested to see how these men, departing from the same point, could travel different roads. First: Henry Slesar spins a tale of terror and eternal life.

THE KNOCKING IN THE CASTLE

By HENRY SLESAR
Illustrated by SCHELLING

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"Come to a party," he said one day at lunch. "A friend of mine, Mike Davanzati. Okay, more than a friend," he admitted sheepishly. "The Davanzatis own that auto factory I told you about, and I wouldn't mind the American francise—"

Louisa had laughed, and squeezed his hand. "That's what I like about you, Tom, your outspoken rascality."

The smile faded when he told her where the Davanzatis made their home.

"Is something the matter?"

"No," Louisa said, with pink spots deepening on her white cheekbones. "As a matter of fact, I've been thinking of visiting Bercinno for some time. My husband owned some property there."

"Then it's all right about the party?"

It would have been all right; it would have been perfectly fine; if Mike Davanzati, inspired by Louisa's curiously Mediterranean beauty and wanting to impress her; inspired by whatever teasing spirit makes us search out the things that frighten us, had not suggested an expedition to the deserted castle of Adriani.

"I know we'll hear it this time," he said exultantly, his dark eyes fixed on Louisa's face. "In honor of the beautiful Miss Brown, the demon of the castle will knock for us. I know it!"

"Thank you," Louisa said, unsmiling. "But I'd rather not go. I've seen the castle before and I never found it very interesting."

Mike was undaunted. "But have you ever seen it by moonlight, *mia cara?* When the spirits move through its ruined battlements, and the Devil himself pounds against the door?" He made a fist and thundered it against a table. *Boom! Boom! Boom!* Louisa drew back at the sound.

"Thank you," she whispered. "But no."

The other women, already disgruntled by envy, now mewed at Louisa with open disapproval. Mike flushed as if insulted, and Tom looked unhappy. There seemed to be no alternative but to change her mind, and Louisa did.

IN the moonlight, folding her satin skirts to enter Tom's Alfa-Romeo, her skin looked whiter than ever.

In one way, Louisa was correct: the castle of Adriani wasn't very interesting, not as an example of medieval fortification. All that remained of its historic past was the ruin of its single donjon, used by a later builder as the cornerpiece of an ordinary mansion that had housed the dwindling noble family. As it came into sight, Tom Sedgeman, unimpressed, glanced at Louisa,

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and was surprised to see a frozen, glassy look of what could have been restrained panic.

There were four cars in the expedition, and they halted simultaneously in front of the castle door, headlights illuminating the scabrous stone. Mike climbed out first, and assembled his little party with the gestures of an orchestra conductor.

"Now we must be very still," he said. "The demon of the castle musn't know we're here."

A girl giggled. "Have you really heard any knocking, Mike? Honestly?"

"Of course," he said indignantly. "Everyone in Italy knows the castle is haunted. We're very proud of it."

"Haunted by what?" Tom grinned. "The Italian Tourist Office?"

"Haunted by a woman," Mike said. "That's what most of us believe. The last resident of the castle was the Contessa Francesca Paulo d'Adriani, an unsociable witch who never left the place, not once in the memory of the townspeople. She died under strange circumstances during a visit from her brother. He himself disappeared soon after—"

"When did all this happen?"

"Not very long ago, perhaps twelve years; but the castle has been haunted ever since." Mike surveyed their grim faces with enjoyment. "Somewhere, deep down in the dungeons that survived from medieval times, the ghost of the Contessa d'Adriani knocks; her hand on the iron ring of some dungeon door, she hammers against the unyielding stone."

Tom chuckled.

"Every house has a knock or two. Maybe it's only the radiator."

"Listen," Mike Davanzati said. "And you'll know it's not an ordinary knock."

They listened. The moon, three quarters full, slipped out from behind a cloud and washed the crumbling turret of the castles single tower. Someone flicked off their headlights, and then, by common consent, the rest of the car lights were dimmed. In their silence, they could hear the wind moaning with appropriate eeriness through the dry branches of the leafless trees around them. Tom, smiling weakly, looked at Louisa and slid his arm from her long black gloves to the cold flesh of her upper arm.

The moon retreated again.

Then they heard the knock, a clank of metal against rock, a feeble sound that somehow reverberated through the interstices of the ruined castle.

Louisa Brown screamed. She split the air with a sound more terrible in that time and place than the pounding of demons or the shriek of any spirit.

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They were back in Rome before Tom heard her story, and learned the meaning of that scream.

SHE was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, and born beautiful. Her early years were a succession of Beautiful Child contests and dreary photography studios. She was doted on and pampered and flattered and completely miserable. So was her father, who soon began to hate her, and she became the third corner of a triangle that finally ended in divorce. She was given in custody to her mother, but she was too big and rebellious by then to remain mama's prize exhibit. She left home at nineteen and went to New York. Before she was twenty-one, she was earning as much as a thousand dollars a week as a photographer's model, but never felt a pang of gratitude towards her mother for making it all possible.

She met Victor Adriani the way she had met other men: he was rich or influential enough to push the right button in the model agency machinery and have a meeting arranged. Victor always regretted what he called the shabbiness of that introduction; he told her that if he were God, he would make a poetical rearrangement of their past. Victor really talked that way; it wasn't an affectation.

He was a conventionally handsome man, in his late twenties or early thirties, and vain of his good looks: at least, he was frequently consulting mirrors. His complexion was enviably smooth and unlined, and almost as fair as Louisa's; he had a dread of sunlight and avoided even the hint of a tan. He said there was a predilection to skin malignancies in his family, and he thought it was best not to tempt the fates.

At first, she thought he was only an eccentric. Then she became aware of his tranquil strength.

On their first evening together, he said:

"What do you think of men like me, who see pictures of pretty girls and arrange rendevouz? We're not much better than voyeurs, are we?"

She smiled her best smile at him, the practiced effort of a lifetime.

"I don't like your smile, Miss Brown," he said. "You don't have to smile for me. You see, I have a different picture of you entirely, a lovely, unsmiling picture. I'm sure you've never seen before. Would you care to see it?"

"No, thanks," she said. "I've seen too many pictures of myself already."

"This isn't a photograph. It's a painting, by an eighteenth century portrait artist named Coperdin. If your hair was darker,

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if your complexion was a shade more olive, you might have sat for that portrait. It's hanging in my bedroom this very minute."

SHE couldn't help laughing. From the beginning she had known there was something antiquated about Victor Adriani, but she hadn't expected this minor variation on the etchings bit.

"Your laugh," he said seriously. "Now that's a different story. Your laugh is different from your smile. Much more natural. The woman in the painting laughed like that."

Louisa went to see the woman in the painting. She was a long-necked, delicately-tinted creature with a sober expression. But Victor Adriani had been right about the resemblance.

"But how do you know we laughed alike?" she asked.

"I'm sure of it," he said.

There was something else extraordinary about the painting. It was one of the poorest specimens in a private art collection that any museum would have envied. Victor Adriani was a wealthy man, and this was how he expressed his wealth: in a gloomy brownstone whose walls were cluttered with paintings whose gross value must have been staggering.

For a rich man, he sent strange gifts. His first to Louisa was an antique opal pin, obviously not very expensive. Victor said: "I was afraid you might be offended by a costly gift, so I sent you this. It's been in my family for generations."

"I think that's all the more reason for giving it back," Louisa said lightly. "You needn't worry about offending me, Victor, crisp packets of money will do fine."

But she wore the pin, and Victor discussed the next gift before presenting it to her.

"How would you like to learn Italian?"

"What in the world for?"

"You might go to Italy some day," he said gravely. "I have a friend, a language tutor, who could give you a course of instruction. I could do it myself, but not so professionally."

"I didn't know you spoke Italian, Victor."

"I was born in a village called Bercinno. I left many years ago, but I make an occasional trip home. And someday—who knows?—you might want to come with me."

"That," Louisa said, "is taking a lot for granted."

She was strongly attracted to Victor, but for a time, it was someone else's opinion that kept her from responding more warmly to him. Her closest friend, Trina, a model like herself, took a dislike to Victor. She said he was like "something out

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of a museum." She called Victor's house "the mausoleum," his black Mercedes, "the hearse," and after attending the one and only dinner party Victor threw, she called it a "wake."

But it was after that same dinner party that Victor asked Louisa to marry him. The guests had gone, earlier than guests should have left if they had been enjoying themselves. Victor seemed hurt by the impression he had made on Louisa's friends, and she found herself consoling him. That night, they became engaged. They were married a month later, and Louisa learned to speak Italian.

ON their honeymoon, he told her about the castle.

"It's not right to call it that, of course," he smiled. "At one time, when the Adrianis were feudal lords, there was a genuine medieval fortress on the site. Evidently, the family were not successful defenders of it, because there isn't much left of the original structure."

"I still think it sounds wonderful," Louisa said. "The castle of Adriani! I suppose it's properly haunted."

"I'm afraid the Psychical Society would be disappointed in the old place. The original foundation is there, and that means dungeons and cellars and such, but it's all rather inaccessible."

"Does anyone live there now?"

"Yes," Victor said, turning his face from her. "My sister Francesca."

She was going to ask more, but saw the faint glaze of his eyes, and knew it would be useless. She had already come to know Victor's moods, including this one. She had to wait to learn more of Francesca, and the occasion provoked a quarrel.

They had moved into Victor's brownstone art gallery after their marriage, upon his promise to have the place aired and painted. He had allowed Louisa to redecorate the upper floor herself, and the activity kept her happily occupied for the first few weeks of their married life. She had a problem keeping Victor from getting underfoot; he rarely left the house all day, spending most of his time in the study engaged in any of half a dozen hobbies. He was expert in the restoration of old paintings; not so expert in painting new ones. He was a collector of illuminated manuscripts, rare books, stamps, coins. He did some occasional sculpture. He played the piano, well, and the sound of his music became an accompaniment to her stay in that house. It wasn't a long stay, not after the letter from Bercinno arrived.

When Louisa saw the slim envelope brilliant with stamps, she thought it was a mistake. It was

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postmarked Italy, and the sender's name was Contessa Francesca Paulo d'Adriani. She looked again, and made sure it was addressed to *Mrs.* Victor Adriani.

She sought out Victor in his study, opening the letter as she went. "Look, darling," she said. "Your sister's written me. Isn't that nice of her?"

Francesca's writing was exquisitely fine, the tracery of a spider. She hadn't deciphered a word when the letter was snatched from her hand.

"I can't let you read this, Louisa—"

"Not let me read it? But it's *my* letter!"

"Please trust me in this, Louisa. Francesca's a strange woman, she's capable of saying hurtful things, even to someone she hasn't met. I regretted the necessity of telling her about our marriage—"

"I'm not a baby, Victor. If your sister wants to say a lot of nasty jealous things, I won't mind a bit. What I *do* mind is this nasty unsatisfied curiousity." She giggled, and made a sudden thrust to tear the letter out of her husband's grasp. He was too quick for her. He tore up the blue sheets deliberately, and threw the fragments in the fireplace. Then he looked at her with eyes pleading apology, but Louisa was too angry to do anything more than turn and leave the room.

But they were honeymooners, and quarrels were for the making-up. That night, Victor said:

"All right, I'll tell you about Francesca. She and I are the only surviving members of the Adriani family. Even though I left Bercinno to travel and enjoy the pleasures of this wide and varied world, Francesca felt her obligation was to remain in our family 'castle' and continue to uphold our dubious heritage. I'm afraid Francesca was never told of the decline of the feudal system . . ."

"You don't mean that seriously?"

"Francesca is displeased with me," Victor said dryly. "She thinks I have debased the family name, blotted the escutcheon, by deserting the ancestral home. And of course, all I've really done is left a dreary, impoverished village, a drab, half-ruined mansion, and a sister too much in love with the past."

"But you do go home, Victor, don't you?"

"Once each year, I make a pilgrimage back to the castle of Adriani. My stay is always brief: five days, a week, that's all of Francesca I can stand."

"And will you be going again soon?"

"Before long," Victor smiled, "we'll be going."

"Oh, Victor!" Louisa said, sit-

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ting up in bed. "My hair! My clothes! What am I going to *wear?*"

AT the end of June, they began making plans for their trip abroad. Louisa found there were more prerequisites than a hairdo and new clothes: there were vaccinations and passports. It was while she was conducting a frantic hunt for her own birth certificate that she found the yellowed parchment authenticating the birth of Vittorio d'Adriani.

Louisa had always been careless about records and such; she was the despair of banks and accountants. Unable to find the certificate among her own papers, she conceived the idea that, in the move to Victor's house, her documents had become intermingled with his. She searched his study, on a day when Victor was out.

What she found was a rolled sheet of heavy vellum, and the faded writing had been done, literally, by a fine Italian hand. She translated it to the best of her ability, and determined that it officialized the birth, to the Baron Alfonso Montefiore d'Adriani, of a male child in the Year of Our Lord 1726, and that said child, henceforth to be known as Vittorio Alessandrio d'Adriani, was the true and rightful heir, by the grace of God and the consent of His Majesty, etcetera, etcetera . . . Louisa felt a thrill of pleasure in this confirmation of Victor's ancient lineage.

That night, she didn't tell Victor about what she had seen, but she did ask him to talk about his family history. It was a subject he was less than keen on.

"It was some distant ancestor who earned the family its title," he said ruefully, "and the legend is that he managed it by stealing grain from someone else to help feed the armies of the Crusade. The gentleman who built the castle was my great-grandfather, Gianozzo d'Adriani, who died ignominiously on the night my grandfather was born . . ."

"How ignominiously?"

"He was celebrating," Victor grinned, "at the place of business of a certain lady of the town, and she stabbed him during a quarrel. My grandfather Lorenzo turned out to be much less frivolous in nature; he was, in fact, considered to be something of a scientist."

She was suddenly puzzled. "Your great grandfather was named Giovanni?"

"No, Gianozzo."

"And your grandfather was named Lorenzo?"

"Yes, and my father was named Francesco. Francesca was named in his honor, as she was the first born."

"But then who in the world is Vittorio Allesandrio d'Adriani?"

Victor laughed, and pulled her

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towards him. "Why, that's me, of course. Don't you know your own husband?"

"But who were *you* named after? An uncle or something?"

"I suppose there might have been an uncle who was my namesake. For heaven's sake, Louisa, why is it so important?"

"Well, you can't blame me for being curious. There's that funny old birth certificate, or whatever you call it, and I was just puzzled about it—"

"What birth certificate?" She felt him stiffening, and already regretted her confession.

"I was in your study this afternoon, looking for something. My own birth certificate, as a matter of fact; the people at the passport office insist on seeing it, or it's a whole messy business about affidavits and things—"

"So you went through my papers?"

"I didn't think you'd mind, Victor."

"Yes," he said coldly. "I do mind. Please don't ever do that again, Louisa. Even married people should respect each other's privacy."

"Yes, of course. I'm sorry, Victor."

Later, she asked him the question again.

"Yes," he said vaguely. "I had forgotten about that old document. There *was* another Vittorio d'Adriano born into the family, but the poor fellow didn't survive his childhood. Life expectancy was short in those days. So very, very short."

A strange thing happened that night. She woke up suddenly, and saw that Victor's bed was empty. At first she thought he was downstairs, in his study, but then she saw the partially opened bathroom door. And Victor, standing at the mirror, looking at himself. Nothing more than that. Just staring at his own reflection. She said nothing, and soon fell asleep again.

THEY sailed for Italy in the middle of the following month, but her excitement was tempered by Victor's gloom. He had spoken of the trip with some enthusiasm before, but now that the time had come, it was clear that Victor regarded his pilgrimage as a chore and unpleasant duty. Louisa didn't doubt that Francesca d'Adriani was responsible for his unhappy mood, and found herself resenting Victor's sister before setting eyes on her.

The six-day crossing did nothing to improve his outlook. Victor had candidly confessed a fear of flying, but he didn't seem to like ships much better. He stayed in their cabin for the greater part of the voyage, venturing out on deck only on the calmest days.

It was a relief when the ship

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finally docked at Naples. By this time, Victor actually looked haggard, and had lost a noticeable amount of weight. His indisposition stifled any desire Louisa might have had for sightseeing in the port city; instead they began their journey to Bercinno at once.

When she first saw the castle of Adriani her reaction was one of mixed disappointment and pleasure. She was disappointed by its unpalatial appearance and illkept grounds. On the other hand, she was pleased by its homely stolidity; it had no cold medieval aura, no suggestion of damp gray stone or draughty corridors.

Francesca didn't come to the door to greet them. The luggage was taken, grudgingly; by a white-thatched old servant named Giorgio, who didn't trouble to announce them. Victor led her through the bare front hallways to a flight of carpeted stairs that rose steeply to the second floor; they found their own way to the bedroom at the end of the hall. Mistakenly, the bags had been placed somewhere else, and Victor berated the old servant in violent Italian decibels. Giorgio didn't take offense; a moment later, he was complaining to Victor about the brother he hadn't seen in fifteen years; if the Contessa could arrange a leave of absence, and a small advance on his wages . . . Victor said he would talk to his sister on the old man's behalf, and sent him out.

Louisa had no complaints about the room, however. It was spacious and lovely, its windows fanning out to a superb view of the countryside; the wood of the fourposter shone as if lit by candlelight. She felt happy when she saw that room, but Francesca d'Adriani spoiled the mood. Her sudden appearance in the doorway had the flamboyance of a conjurer's trick. She was dressed, head to foot, in somber black. She wore only one piece of jewelery, but it was more than an ornament: it was a badge, a talisman, an enormous metal cross on a heavy silver chain. Francesca was like something out of an abbey, a religious figure in a medieval mural. Except for her face. For all its starkness (she was even fairer than her brother) it was the face of a woman not free from vanity. She wore heavy, almost theatrical makeup; her mouth was painted cruelly, and there were harsh rouge highlights on her cheekbones.

She came forward with a smile, and proferred a frozen hand.

"I'm Francesca," she said, in unaccented English. "Welcome to Bercinno, my dear." She held Louisa's hand tightly and surveyed the girl from head to toe.

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"Why, Victor!" she laughed. "You never told me how young she was. My dear, she's only a *child!*"

LOUISA flushed, feeling not complimented but demeaned, but Francesca's opening words seemed to relax the atmosphere. Even Victor smiled ruefully, and in the doorway, the old servant chuckled.

Louisa didn't see her sister-in-law again until the following morning. Exhausted from the trip, she asked to take her dinner in the bedroom, and Francesca arranged for the delivery of a small but elegant tray of food. Victor didn't share the meal with her; he had "business" to discuss with his sister, and disappeared somewhere in the house until nightfall. Louisa was asleep before his return, and awoke after he had risen, and began to feel slightly resentful of this enforced solitude.

She felt better when she drew the curtain and the sun splashed lavishly into the room, when she saw the green contours of the countryside, the rose arbor that climbed almost into the room itself. She heard voices below, and saw Francesco, her face shielded from the sun by an outsize picture hat, talking to a gardener who held a wicked set of shears behind his back. Suddenly, Francesca looked up and caught her eyes: Louisa felt impaled by the gaze. Then Victor's sister smiled, and said:

"Good morning! Won't you join me for breakfast?"

When Louisa came downstairs, she found that the invitation had been loosely worded. Francesca had already eaten breakfast, and she was content to sip dark coffee from a fragile cup and watch Louisa eat. There was one advantage to the arrangement; Francesca was willing to lead the conversation.

"Victor wanted me to apologize for his disappearance," she said. "There are so many grubby business problems he takes care of for me when he arrives . . . I'm afraid you won't see very much of him for the next two days."

"Where is he now?"

"At the local tax assessor's, arguing over some stupid arrears they claim we owe them. These people always wait for Victor's return to press these issues; they prefer to deal with a man, I suppose." She smiled as two of the gardeners shuffled by, staring frankly at Louisa. "You mustn't mind them. Everyone in the village is curious about Victor's new bride. Curious and surprised."

"Why should they be surprised?"

"But we all were. We'd stopped thinking of the possibility of Vic-

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tor's marriage, he seemed much too—old." She laughed lightly. "I imagine you must find him dreadfully set in his ways."

"No, not really." Then, reluctantly. "Yes, a little, I suppose."

"It's funny about Victor," Francesca said. "The way he always accuses me of clinging to the past. Why, there's no one who clings to the past more than Victor does; the fact that he ran off and left his home, that he chose to live in all those odd places and mingle with those odd people, those things don't really matter. Victor always returns here, to Bercinno, to his roots . . . ."

Louisa felt the need to defend him.

"But he doesn't stay very long, does he? Only a week or so?"

"But he always comes back. He must. Nothing can prevent that, no one can ever keep him away." She pulled the hat down over her eyes. "Not even you could do that, my dear, pretty as you are."

"Oh, but I wanted him to come! I wouldn't think of keeping Victor away."

"You couldn't if you tried. Victor always has his own way. He's terribly self-centered, of course, I'm sure you've found that out already."

"No, I haven't. Victor is very good to me."

"Yes, I'm sure he is. Being good to you would be part of his self-centeredness, don't you see? However," Francesca said, studying her coffee cup, "you can't say you weren't warned, my dear. You did get my letter, did you not?"

Louisa had a vision of flames consuming the torn sheets, but she said: "Yes, of course."

"Well, then you know what you must do. I hope you've taken my advice to heart."

Louisa hesitated.

"I'm afraid I don't recall what that was."

The woman's gaze returned from the depths of the cup, and her eyes were hooded.

"Why, leaving him, of course. Divorcing Victor, as soon as you can. There's really no other way."

She stood up, and made it her exit line.

LOUISA spent the rest of the day waiting for her husband's return, uncertain whether to feel anger, amusement, or merely bewilderment at Francesca's blunt advice. This much she did know: she intended to confront Victor with it.

He came back shortly before the dinner hour, looking happier and more animated than Louisa had ever seen him. His day of sociable argument with the townspeople of Bercinno had obviously been a pleasant one, and she didn't want to spoil it now. After

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all, Victor had warned her that Francesca was eccentric; another few days and they would be leaving. She decided to say nothing.

At the end of the evening meal, Victor took her hand and said apologetically: "You must excuse me for a few more hours, darling. I have a hundred and one papers for Francesca to examine tonight. You see, my sister pretends to be very stupid about financial and legal matters, and saves up all her problems for my visit."

"I understand," Louisa murmured. "I'm tired, anyway, so I'll be going to bed early."

"Tomorrow will be all ours," Victor smiled. "I promise you that."

She went to bed early, but the argument woke her at midnight.

At first, she thought it was the impetus of her own troubled dream that had broken her sleep. Then she sat up in bed, and realized that there were voices raised in anger on the floor below. Her heart thudded, but she thought: "It's that stupid tax business; that's what they're quarreling about . . ." But as the muffled, violent duel of words continued, she knew that the subject of their anger was herself, and she felt miserable and somehow afraid.

Then there was silence, and the shuffle of steps outside her room. The door opened, and Victor said:

"So you're awake? I'm sorry, darling, it's my fault—"

"Turn on the light, please."

He lit the lamp beside the bed, shut the door carefully, and sat beside her. He was pale, and his eyes looked pained.

"What is it, Victor?"

"I must talk to you, Louisa. I know how late it is, that you're tired—"

"It's Francesca, isn't it? I could hear you quarreling downstairs. She's already told me what she thinks about our marriage. You were right when you burned her letter . . ."

"It's not just Francesca. It's far more than that."

He put his hands on her arms, framing her in an embrace that lacked warmth.

"I've decided that you must hear the truth about me, Louisa. Yes, and about Francesca, too. I hadn't meant to tell you like this, so suddenly; but now I feel I must."

"All right," Louisa said, with deliberate calm. "I'm always interested in true confessions, Victor." She tried to smile, but failed.

"You'll listen to everything I say; you won't judge me until I'm through?"

"I'll listen to you."

He closed his eyes.

"I am Vittorio Alessandro d'Adriani," he said. "And I was born in this house, in this very

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room, on November the Ninth, in the year 1726."

He held her rigidly, with hands strong and cold as iron, as if afraid to let her go.

MY father was a Baron, the Baron Francesco Alfonso d'Adriani, but I have no recollection of my mother even though she lived to my fourth year. It was my father's image which dominate my childhood memories, and even now, more than two centuries since his death, I can remember his face as he told me of our family's incredible heritage. I was eighteen years old at the time, and Francesca was twenty.

"It was an ancient secret even then, for it had begun with the first Baron d'Adriani in the year 1321. This Baron had been of serious religious bent, and was a favorite of Pope Clement the Fifth. Ironically, it was his friendship with that holy man which led to the Baron's discovery, and to his eventual break with the Church.

"At that time, in Italy, France, and Germany, the alchemists were flourishing, searching for the *elixir vitae* and the philosopher's stone. One of them, Arnold de Villeneuve, had recently died, and had neglected to fulfill a promise he had made to Pope Clement during his lifetime, to make a present of a work called *The Practice of Medicine* to the Holy See. The Pope was anxious to find this treatise, and he sent a circular letter to all the clergy of Europe, asking their help. The Baron joined this search, spending a considerable amount of his own money in the process, and he was eventually successful. However, Pope Clement never saw Villeneuve's treatise. The Baron found something in the work too precious to give away—even to the Bishop of Rome.

"It was a formula, a prescription, if you will. Villeneuve credited it to his friend, Pietro d'Apone, an adept like himself, who was later tortured and killed on the rack of the Inquisition. Supposedly, this formula would guarantee eternal life if one were to take small doses of the mixture regularly. The Baron instantly proceeded to the task of making up a batch, but he found the project more of a task than he had anticipated. Many of the ingredients were unknown to the layman; many others were virtually unobtainable. He needed the services of a practicing alchemist, and he found one in the person of a physician named Barcolo, a gentle old man who had a reputation for miraculous healing salves.

"Barcolo wasn't interested in the Baron's proposition; he claimed that the formula would never be effective. But by this

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time, the Baron had become fixated on the idea of the eternal prolongation of life; he had abandoned every other ideal. Barcolo's reluctance enraged him. He was evidently a brutal man, because he abducted the old physician bodily and imprisoned him in the castle dungeon, with orders that he prepare the formula, or something equally efficacious, before he would be released.

"Our family history is blank during the next ten years, but at the end of that decade, old Barcolo, who must have been well into his eighties, produced an elixir that worked. As God is my witness, Louisa. It worked.

THE first Baron d'Adriani proved the efficacy of the elixir, not upon himself, but upon his son, my grandfather. The Baron was too old and too ill by then to wish to prolong his own painful existence, but his son was then in his twenties, a wildly exuberant youth who very much liked the idea of eternal life. Incredible tales were told of him. He was said to have been mortally wounded in a duel, and yet he lived. He lost a leg in a carriage accident and was bled white by his injury, and yet he lived. He was once imprisoned for almost a year without food or drink, and yet he survived. He was rumored to be almost a hundred when he died, as youthful in appearance as a man of thirty-five, and his enemies—he had plenty of them—brought about his death only through great violence.

"His son, my father, told me about these things; and then he showed me what was left of my own inheritance."

"It was a pale blue liquid, in a beautiful silver chalice, kept sealed behind the stone doors and locks of the underground passages which ran beneath the castle d'Adriani. Its contents had diminished since the old alchemist had first concocted the magic elixir, and the formula was a mystery which no man could fathom. Each year, my father said, his powers of eternal life must be renewed by a few drops of the fluid. It was a ceremony that, once begun, must never go unobserved. It was an act to be held in utmost secrecy and with utmost reverence; he invoked the name of God, from Whom all Mysteries derived. I was awed, frightened, bewildered by his story, and by the initiation in which Francesca and I participated, the sipping of the strange, tasteless blue liquid that promised us life eternal.

"My father died in 1806, a man who appeared to be no more than thirty years of age, and it took the cannon of Napoleon to bring about his end. Francesca and I then became heirs to the elixir of life . . .

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"Louisa! You look at me as if I were mad . . ."

She said:

"Are you telling me you're—two hundred years old, Victor?" The words emerged lightly, touched with grim humor. "That birth record I found—it was your own?"

"My own, Louisa." He turned his eyes from her. "And now, of course, you feel revulsion, disgust."

"No," she said numbly. "I don't feel a thing. You see, I think this is all a joke—or a nightmare." She touched his hand, feeling the firm, warm flesh. "Tell me something, she said. "In all those years—how many women were there, Victor? What an opportunity you must have had!"

He didn't smile.

"There was only one other woman that mattered. The woman of the portrait."

"Did you marry her?"

"Yes," her husband said.

She leaned back against the pillows.

"What happened to her, Victor?"

"She died, of course. A little before her normal life span, at the age of sixty. We had parted long before that; she couldn't bear the contrast between us, as she aged and I did not. No love could have withstood that difference, not hers, not mine. . . . .

"Then why didn't you keep her young, too? If you loved her so much, why did you let it happen?"

He twisted his fingers together.

"I wanted it," he said. "I begged her to share the elixir, but she refused. Phillipa was Catholic, and very devout; when I fell in love with her, my rival was the Nunnery. In her mind, to drink the elixir was to traffic with the Devil; and so she aged, and died."

"Just as I will," Louisa said.

"No!" His grip on her arm was painful. "This is what I came to tell you, Louisa. I wanted you to learn of this, here, in my home, in this room. To learn of your future, our future . . ."

"You mean you want *me* to drink it? The elixir?"

"Yes, my darling."

"And I'll never grow old, never die?"

"Never is an imperfect word, Louisa. But the aging process will be slowed, darling, years will become like hours. Each year we will have to return here, to Bercinno, to the castle, to visit the cellars and drink a few drops of the life-giving fluid. We cannot take any with us, or change the ceremony, or in any way alter the tradition described by my father; we dare not tamper with the mystery, Louisa, do you understand?"

"And how much is left? After two centuries?"

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"Enough, my darling, enough for another two centuries of happiness."

"And Francesca? Enough for her, too?"

"Yes! Francesca has been spoiled by too much immortality; she has become greedy. This is why she has been so opposed to any marriage I might make; her simple greed for the stuff in the chalice. She hates to share it, but she will . . . . she must . . ."

"Is that what—you were arguing about?"

Victor stiffened.

"There is no argument. I am master of this house, Louisa, and Francesca will do as I say."

She trembled violently.

"Victor, I'm frightened!"

THE next evening, an hour before dinner, Victor came to their room and changed his clothes, dressing for the ceremony in somber gray. Louisa watched him, not saying anything, fearing what was to follow. Then he came to her, and said:

"Francesca is waiting for us, darling."

"Victor, I don't know if I can face her—"

"She is reconciled to it, Louisa, there's nothing to worry about. We'll go down now; it will all be over in a matter of minutes. . . ."

"To the dungeons?"

He laughed. "You make it sound so melodramatic. There are no prisoners in chains, Louisa, only many bottles of wine and a lot of useless things you might find in any attic in America."

She stood up.

"All right. I'm ready."

Francesca was waiting, as Victor had said, standing silently in front of the massive oak door

that lead to the subterranean passages of the old house. Like Victor, she was dressed as if for mourning, her face rigidly expressionless; there was only the smallest flicker of her eyelids when she saw Louisa.

There were no steps leading to the lowest levels of the underground chambers; only sloping stone ramps, incongruously light-

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ed by a string of naked electric light bulbs. In their harsh glare, the atmosphere seemed unreal, a medieval stage-setting.

But when they came to the last chamber, at the end of the final corridor, there were no more lights. In what might have been a respected tradition, Victor carefully lighted two enormous candlesticks, thick as the trunks of young trees, that flanked the entrance.

Then they went inside.

The chamber was square, its roof so low that Victor was forced to stoop. It was empty, except for a contrivance of iron and wood.

For the first time, Victor spoke to her. He smiled, and said: "This, Louisa, you might properly call a dungeon."

He stepped to the device, and turned the spoked wheel that operated a chained pulley, and a great stone door began to rise from the floor.

The inner chamber was no larger. There was another door here, a smaller one of iron, no more than five feet square.

"The key," Victor said to his sister.

She brought it from the folds of her gown, and handed it to him. He went to the door, and inserted the key in the lock. There was a momentary struggle with the tumblers; and then the door yielded.

Louisa, expecting anything, gasped; not in fear, but in admiration. The silver chalice, almost three feet tall, was strikingly beautiful. Its intricately wrought silver was gleaming and untarnished. Two tiny silver drinking cups, their interiors lined with blue porcelain, stood beside it, divided by a delicately-turned silver dipper, its little mouth capable of holding no more than a thimbleful of liquid.

Now it was Francesca's turn. She came forward, and filled the cups. No more than four drops of the pale blue liquid in the dipper filled both halfway to the brim.

She handed one to her brother.

"To life, Victor," she said, and the toast was casual.

They drank, their eyes locked.

Then Victor held his empty cup towards his sister, and the woman looked at it with a venomous expression. Louisa heard her sharp intake of breath, and saw her long nails raking the side of her skirt.

"Francesca," he said softly, dangerously.

She took the tiny goblet, and filled it.

When she handed it to Louisa, all emotion had been erased from her face.

Louisa drank, and found the blue miracle tasteless. The *elixir vitae* might have been water.

Then the iron door was sealed

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shut with a clang. The stone door was lowered. The candles were snuffed out.

They returned upstairs, from one world to another, and sat down to an ordinary meal, in an ordinary room.

Victor talked of taxes.

THEY sailed for home at the end of the week. Victor seemed infinitely calmer during the voyage. They spent long hours on deck, watching the swell of the waves, speaking infrequently. Louisa said nothing of the "miracle" that had taken place; but she thought of nothing else. When Victor dozed, she studied his serene, unlined face in wonderment; soon, she began studying her own in the mirror, and thinking about an ageless future.

On the second day out, she said:

"Victor, is it really true? Can such a thing be possible?"

"It's true," he said gently.

"Then you looked like this, just this way—almost two hundred years ago?"

"No, Louisa, I was a boy of eighteen, then. The years have moved upon me, but gradually. You'll be young, too, as long as you return to Bercinno regularly."

"And if I didn't?"

"Don't speak of it; there can be no such alternative."

"If I didn't return, Victor?"

"Why, then the years would have their revenge, of course. They would flood back swiftly. But that can never happen. We will always return, darling."

"But what if we couldn't go back? If we were—detained somehow?"

"The timetable is not strict. Each year, at approximately the same time, we must sip the elixir, this is our only instruction. At first, I couldn't bear to be more than a few miles away from that chalice. But later, as I grew accustomed to the facts of my existence, and bored with my surroundings, I yearned for travel, for new people, new interests. Then, of course, travel became imperative. A man who doesn't age, Louisa—he cannot remain in any one milieu for many years. Francesca solves the problem by never leaving the castle, by rotating the people who serve her and befriend her. For me, such an existence would be like the tomb itself."

Louisa said: "But we *can* die, Victor. Can't we?"

"Yes, we can die. Death must struggle to possess us, but it can be done. A violent injury, irreparable damage to vital organs, only these can kill us. No disease can harm us, no minor injuries, not even thrist or hunger; there is life eternal in our bones."

She clutched his hand.

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"Victor — are we monsters?"

He laughed.

"Look at me, darling. Look at yourself! Would you call us that?"

Louisa laughed, too—the first time in weeks.

THE trip abroad, or its consequences, seemed to have wrought a change in Victor. His mood became unvaryingly cheerful. He began to be discontent with the gloomy, museum-like atmosphere of their brownstone, and they talked of moving to a sunny penthouse, or even to some spacious hilltop house in the country. They discussed places to go: Hawaii, the West Indies, the Orient. Nothing came of the talk, but Louisa was happy, happier than she had ever been.

She began to see her old friends again. Even Trina. Trina was married herself now, retired from the modeling grind, and her new husband, Crane, was a slim and rather inane young man with a pleasant disposition and a lot of money. They went out together, a mismatched foursome, with Louisa and Trina handling all the conversation between them, Crane and Victor finding almost nothing to talk about, but neither minding.

Trina wasted no time in telling Louisa what she thought about Victor.

"That man's *changed*," she said. "He's so full of life, Louisa! I guess all he needed was marriage."

Louisa laughed, and was pleased.

She told Victor about Trina's remark, and he said:

"She's absolutely right. Marriage to you has changed me, darling. Especially now . . ."

"You mean—because I'm like you."

"Yes," he said soberly. "Because I needn't mingle pity with my love; pity for the fact that I would have remained young, while you . . ."

"I still can't believe it's true, Victor. I don't think I ever will."

"It will be years before the truth is apparent. And when that time comes, darling, you may have to make some sacrifices. Eventually you'll probably have to give up your 'old' friends, like Trina."

"But why should I? Even if I didn't age, Trina would never guess the reason. She'd think in terms of—well, plastic surgery, not—witchcraft." She said the word self-consciously.

"It doesn't matter," Victor said. "The decision won't be yours, anyway. Trina herself won't want to continue your friendship, not on such unfair terms. Does that make you sad?"

Louisa thought about it, and said:

"No. I guess it doesn't."

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SHE found herself looking at Trina with new eyes. She felt sorry for her, but she felt a secret satisfaction, too, knowing what the years would bring them both.

One night, Trina and Crane threw a party. It was elegantly staged at their handsome apartment, and the guest list was well-balanced between the amusing and the erudite. Trina drank more than she could handle, and spent most of the evening in an open flirtation with Victor. Louisa looked on without jealousy.

Later, they met in the bedroom, and Trina said:

"My God, Louisa, that man of yours is too *much*. He's been every damn' place in the world, knows every damn' book in the library and every picture in the museums . . ." She laughed, hiccoughed, and dabbed awkwardly at her lips with a brush. "You never told me he was a quiz kid sweetie . . ."

"It's only eleven-thirty," Louisa said lightly. "You out to space your drinks a little more, Trina."

"Just shows how stupid I can be, doesn't it? I used to think he was straight out of Madame Tussaud's . . . Now—if only Crane was like him, even a little bit."

"I like Crane," Louisa said. "He's so good-natured."

"He's a sweet little boy, all right. But that's all he is, honey, a little boy. I like Victor's type better. I like that little touch of gray at the temples . . ."

"Gray? Victor doesn't have a gray hair in his head."

Trina giggled. "You ought to get closer to that husband of yours, sweetie. Don't be so standoffish."

When she returned to the party, Louisa sought out Victor and asked him to dance. She saw that Trina was right; there were the faintest touches of gray at Victor's temples. She said nothing about it to him, but she was puzzled and somewhat troubled about it for the rest of the night.

At the breakfastt able the next morning, she said:

"You certainly made a hit with Trina last night."

"Did I?" he smiled. "It turns out that I've read all her favorite books. Which isn't surprising; I've read so many."

"It was more than that." She paused. "Victor, do you ever—touch up your hair?"

"What?"

She attempted a laugh. "Trina said something last night, and I just realized it's true. You're getting a little bit gray; or else you're getting negligent."

He was staring at her, his coffee cup frozen in mid-air.

"I am not gray," he said carefully.

"It's just a touch," Louisa said. "It's really very attractive, Victor, I can't imagine why I

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never noticed it before this."

He put the cup down, and left the table. Worried, she went up the stairs after him; he shut the bedroom door after him. She opened it, and found him confronting the vanity table mirror.

"Victor . . ."

"I hadn't noticed," he murmured. "I wasn't looking for anything like that."

"It can't mean anything, can it?"

"I don't know."

"Even young men get gray Victor, it happens all the time."

"Even young men . . ." He turned to her, his lips twisted. "Young men like me, eh?"

She kissed his brow, and he chuckled.

"I'm being stupid," he said. "A few gray hairs, and I start to panic. I'm sorry, darling, I'm worse than any woman . . ."

HE went out that afternoon, to keep an appointment with an art dealer. Recently, Victor had been raising money by a slow disposition of his art treasures; his profits, he told Louisa, could only be described as enormous. If they continued, she could have the city penthouse and the country mansion both.

But her mood had been blighted. She spent the rest of the day in her room, reading, napping, staring at the screen of a portable television set without awareness of the program she was watching.

At six-thirty that evening, the bedroom door opened and Victor entered. He looked tired, but cheerful.

"It was a tough fight," he said, "but I think I've won it. Margrove will probably buy the Del Piombos, even if he won't quite meet the price I set originally."

"I'm glad," Louisa said.

He came to her, and flicked off the chattering voices on the televison portable.

"You'll ruin your eyes with this thing," he said. "You don't want to do that. Your eyes have to last a long time . . ."

He bent over to kiss her.

"Victor!" Louisa said. "Oh, my God, Victor!"

Her dilated eyes electrified him. He straightened up, and hurried to the mirror.

"Gray!" he said. "Almost white . . ."

"What does it mean?"

"In one day! In a few hours!"

He buried his face in his hands, and she went quickly to his side.

"Victor! Tell me what it means!"

"I don't know! I'm aging! Something's gone wrong—" He held his hands out in front of him, and studied them back and front, moving his fingers.

"But you drank the elixir! You drank it!"

"Yes, yes! But I'm aging, damn

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it, can't you see that for yourself?"

"Was it my fault? Was it something I did?"

He looked about wildly, until his eye fell on the table lamp beside their bed. He yanked the cord from the wall outlet, and slapped off the shade. He put the light beside the vanity mirror, and plugged it in. Then he made a careful study of his face.

"No wrinkles in the skin, no change there yet . . . only the hair . . ."

"Please!" Louisa implored him. "Was it my fault? You said the tradition couldn't be broken —or tampered with—"

"Louisa, for the love of God, will you leave me alone?"

"But why is it happening? Why?"

"I don't know!"

Then he seemed to see something in his own eyes, and he turned to face her.

"Francesca!" he said.

"What?"

"Francesca, of course! My dear sister. My sweet sister! My obliging sister!"

"What do you mean?"

"She was bitterly opposed to this, don't you remember? To you, to my marriage, to your sharing of the elixir! How could I have been stupid enough to trust her?"

"But what did she do?"

"Are you blind?" he shouted. "Don't you see what she's done to me? She's the keeper of the chamber, the guardian of the chalice! She had the key! The opportunity! And the reason. Oh, yes! She made it plain enough! She's cheated me, Louisa, cheated us both—"

He stood up, his eyes blazing, the intensity of his glare seeming to penetrate the walls and traverse the oceans.

"What we drank that night, Louisa—*wasn't the elixir.*"

HE feared plane travel, but only a plane would be quick enough. There was a flight leaving for Rome that evening at nine, but it was filled to capacity, and all they could do was wait for either a cancellation or a morning departure. Victor dreaded the thought of even one more night away from Bercinno; he had become agonizingly conscious of every tick of the clock, of every moment that separated him from the chalice. He paced for an hour, between the mirror and the telephone, while Louisa sat quietly and watched him. Shortly before seven, he whirled on her and said:

"Stop staring at me! Stop it!"

"I'm sorry, Victor—"

"Do you expect me to shrivel before your eyes?"

The telephone rang. He clutched it as if at a lifeline. After a moment, he slammed the re-

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ceiver down and smiled grimly.

"A cancellation, he said. "We'll have to leave now, at once."

They were in Rome before dawn, and speeding by hired car towards Bercinno by the time the sunlight was just rimming the hills with gold.

FRANCESCA didn't seem to be startled at the sudden return of her brother and his wife. But she had had sufficient time to recover from any surprise; Giorgio, the old manservant, had been in the tower of the castle, and had seen the open car speeding along the highway; he had hurried to prepare his mistress for visitors. Francesca dressed calmly, and came downstairs to greet them.

"Victor! How nice to see you again—and so soon!"

He glowered at Giorgio, who understood the command and left them alone.

Then Victor removed his hat.

"This is why I've returned," he said bitterly. "Look at me, Francesca, take a good look. Did you think you could hide the signs of your betrayal?"

She seemed genuinely shocked.

"But your hair, Victor! It's white—all white!"

"And very becoming," he said, with heavy sarcasm. "But I see you haven't changed at all, Francesca, you're still the raven-haired beauty, aren't you?"

"I don't understand it! What's happened to you?"

"Do you really need explanations?" He stepped towards her, his fists clenched at his sides. "Do you, Francesca? I'm growing old! Can't you see that for yourself? Old!"

"It can't be true! The elixir—"

She tore her eyes from her brother's face, and found Louisa's.

"It's her fault! Hers! Nothing like this ever happened, Victor, not until you married *her*! You broke the tradition—"

"Yes!" he said harshly. "The tradition was broken, all right, but not by me."

"You can't blame me for what's happened!" She put her hand to her throat. "Victor, it's nothing *I've* done! We drank the elixir together—just as always—"

"As always?"

"For two hundred years, Victor!"

"But was it the elixir? Or was it water, Francesca? Cool blue water to appease my thirst—and end my life?"

He put his hands on her shoulders, pressing his thumbs into her collarbone.

Louisa said: "Victor, don't!"

Francesca went rigid; not at her brother's menacing touch, but at the first words from his wife. From supplication, her expression became one of naked malice.

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"Yes, Victor, don't!" she said mockingly. "Don't do anything to hurt poor little Louisa! She's delicate—sensitive—only a baby!"

"What did you do to the elixir, Francesca?"

"The elixir is where it has always been! Safe! From outsiders!"

"That wasn't the elixir we drank that night, was it? Was it, Francesca?"

"No!"

His hands trembled on his sister's shoulder.

"Then give me the key," he said softly. "The key to the iron door. Give it to me this minute, Francesca, every tick of the clock is like a day of my life."

She laughed.

"And if I don't, Victor? What will you do? Kill me?"

"It would be justified?"

"It would be hard doing, Victor, you recall Father's words. Life persists in us—"

"Give me the key!"

"So that *she* can share the elixir? I won't allow that, Victor, I won't! You can turn into dust before I'll do that—"

His hands moved, the fingers crawling to circle her white throat, closing, tightening. All Francesca did was smile. He squeezed harder, and she moaned in pain.

"Oh, God, Victor, stop!" Louisa cried. "I don't *want* to share the elixir, I don't want it!"

"The key!" Victor bellowed.

Francesea's eyes rolled upwards, and her body went limp. Victor relaxed his grip, and let her crumple to the floor. Louisa shrieked, and then gagged with horror when she saw that the woman's eyes were still open, that she stared at her brother with a small smile of triumph struggling against the mask of pain. Louisa spoke his name, and when Victor turned his fury-darkened face in her direction she barely recognized it.

"Leave us, Louisa," he said. "Go to the bedroom. Now."

"Victor, you can't—"

"This is none of your concern. Go on!"

Louisa turned, and ran up the stairs.

SHE was trembling so violently in her agitation that she could do nothing more than fall across the bed, trying to contain the palpitations that were making every muscle throb.

She didn't move again until the tremors ceased.

Then she heard the first terrible cry below; the cry of a woman in anguish.

She ran to the door and turned the knob.

It wouldn't yield.

The scream came again. And another; and still another; then there was no end to screaming. Each one penetrated her body,

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her brain, even her soul felt wounded.

"Stop it! Stop it!" Louisa shouted, hammering at the door. "Let me out of here! Somebody, please!"

But the screams went on, and Louisa hammered, not for escape, but to shut out their devastating horror.

Then there was silence. She heard *nothing* but the moist sound of her own sobs.

She went to the bed again, and put her face into the comforting darkness of the pillows.

Before long, she slept.

She heard the click of the bolt in the darkness, and while her eyes opened, her body failed to move.

She forced her fingers to slide across the silken texture of the bedclothes, and only then remembered where she was.

"Louisa?"

She sat up, and saw her husband.

"I've had to call the police, Louisa. They'll be here any minute; they'll probably want to talk to you."

"The police?"

"There's been an accident, a terrible accident. I'm afraid Francesca's dead."

He came nearer, and she cried out, "You killed her! It wasn't any accident!"

"Is that what you plan to tell the police?"

"Victor, how could you? I heard her screaming—"

"Screams of rage," he said flatly. "Screams of indignation, darling, of hatred for you, for me. When she flung herself from the tower, she did it out of pure malice, destroyed herself for the sake of her hatred—"

"From the tower? Then she—"

"Her skull's crushed. Old Giorgio saw everything, darling, he was a witness to it all." He came to the bed, cautiously, his hands extended, his eyes imploring. "Don't leave me now, Louisa. I need you, darling. I need you more than ever . . ."

Then she saw his face; the grave, troubled face of a man in his early forties, white-haired too soon, marked by lines of suffering.

She took his hands.

SHE had never seen such respectful policemen in her life. They seemed intent upon performing their duties as swiftly and as painlessly as law and custom would permit. They seemed awed by the house, awed by Victor, even awed by the body of the victim they had come to examine. They questioned Victor for less than half an hour, and Louisa not at all. They were less brief with old Giorgio, who seemed to have been the only eyewitness to the tragedy.

"Yes, yes, I saw the Contessa,"

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he said, his eyes wide and his gestures large. "I saw her climb to the tower and then throw herself off, screaming and carrying on. Screaming, yes, that was how she did it, with her mad eyes staring. Yes, she was mad, of course, I have seen it in her eyes, this madness, for many months . . . yes, officers, I will come to the station tomorrow, to make my statement, if my duties will permit . . ."

"Your duties will permit," Victor said somberly.

The following day, Giorgio went to the station, and repeated his words for the official transcript that would be presented at the inquest. And the day after that, he made a long-delayed trip to visit his brother in Sicily, the unfortunate sick brother he had not seen in so many years.

Victor was busy, too; he went to the village and arranged the funeral rites for his dead sister, returning to the castle with a young priest and an elderly undertaker. The services they arranged for Francesca were simple and dignified. Her body was placed in the family mausoleum only a few paces from the house. Less than half a dozen people from the village attended the brief rites, and Louisa, standing beside her husband, looked at the solemn, grieving face of a man just past fifty, shedding tears for a sister he loved.

When the ceremony was over, and the last mourner had left, Victor turned to her and said:

"Now you must go to your room, Louisa. You must go there and wait for me. There's something I must do, and I can't be interrupted, not for a moment."

She went to her bedroom, and heard the lock snapped on the outside.

She knew what Victor had to do.

He had to find the key.

AT first, his search was a silent one. The castle of Adriani, emptied now of its mistress and single servant, seemed invested with the silence of the grave. Even the birds outside her windows had become mute. Not a leaf stirred. The clouds seemed stationery, the world's motion suspended.

Louisa paced the bedroom floor, her steps muffled on the carpet, the silence like a heavy weight on her body.

Towards evening, she grew hungry. She went to the bedroom door, listening for the sound of Victor outside. She heard nothing, but she rapped loudly, hoping to attract his attention.

"Victor!" she said. "Victor, are you out there?"

There was no answer. Soon, she was pounding on the door, unable to control her sobs.

"Victor, I'm hungry! You can't leave me locked up in here!"

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When there was no answer still, she went to the window and looked out at the lengthening shadows in the garden, even speculating on the hazards of climbing down the trailing rose bush.

She thought better of it. She wasn't a prisoner; she was Victor Adriani's wife. No matter what happened, Victor loved and cherished her; he couldn't be blamed for the mood that was on him now; he was a man driven by needs more important than hers.

She went to her bed, and tried to find solace in sleep.

The room was dark when she opened her eyes again; not from sleep, but from a half-awake stupor.

The door was being unlocked.

She lifted herself on her elbows, waiting for the light from the hallway to illuminate the room. But it never came; the hall lights had been dimmed. When Victor entered, she saw only a blurred silhouette, awkwardly stooped.

"Victor—"

"Stay where you are!"

It was a croaking, hoarse, rasping command.

"Victor, I've been waiting all day. I haven't eaten a thing since breakfast, and that wasn't very much. You're not trying to starve me to death, are you?" She even attempted a bantering tone.

"I've brought you something. Not much—something."

The shadow in the doorway shifted; she heard the dull clank of a plate on a tray.

"You sound awful," she said. "Your throat—"

"I'm sorry I have to keep you locked in," the voice said. "It can't be helped, darling, try and understand."

"I do understand, Victor."

She came towards him, moving slowly.

"Don't come any nearer!"

"You don't have to hide from me, darling. I know what's happening to you, I saw it this morning, at the funeral. I want to help you—" Her hand found the lamp beside the bed.

"Louisa, you don't know. You couldn't—"

She turned the switch. There was light in the room, light on Victor's face, before he could prevent it.

LOUISA caught the sob before it left her throat. It was still Victor, her husband, her lover; aging, as she had expected to see him, a man in his late fifties, sixty perhaps; his face marked and ravaged too much for even those years. He was Victor, and he was older.

But so soon! Less than five hours had passed since she had looked upon his tired features and seen them aged; but now the encroaching years had doubled their pace.

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"My poor darling," Louisa said. She reached out to him, but he wouldn't accept the gesture. His eyes were fiery, their intensity undimmed by the process that was altering flesh and bone.

"Leave me alone! I don't want pity from you, Louisa. I don't need it!" He beat the air with his fists. "*I need* the key! The key that hellish woman hid from me!"

"Let me help you, Victor, let me look, too—"

"No!"

He turned and slammed out of the room. This time, he didn't lock the door.

And this time, the sounds of his search became audible. Furniture thudded against the floor as he overturned tables, spilled drawers and their contents, toppled breakfronts and closets. Porcelain and silver crashed, glass shattered. Shelves were swept clean of their bric-a-brac, ornaments ripped from the walls. To Louisa, listening on the other side of the bedroom door, it sounded as if a hundred vandals had invaded the castle of Adriani.

Then Victor's voice joined the sounds of destruction. He shouted and cursed, swearing at his dead sister, swearing at the injustice of the world, swearing most of all at the undiscovered Key. Louisa shut her eyes when she heard his curses; then, when she heard his hoarse sobs, the pitiful sounds of his agony, she covered her ears with both hands.

Then silence again, almost an hour of it.

She was praying when the door burst open again.

"*Get out!*"

Louisa stared at the old man in the doorway. The old man had Victor's face; his eyes still bright and clear in the white wrinkled parchment of his skin. The unkempt white hair had receded, leaving pink bald patches; his shoulders were bent; when he walked, it was with the painful shuffle of the arthritic.

"Get out!" he croaked. "I must search this room now. Did you hear me?"

"Victor—"

He glowered at her, breathing hard, wheezing. "Get out of here, Louisa! Get out, get out!"

Then he covered his face, and groaned.

"God pity me!" he said. "Louisa, I'm old! I'm old! I'll never be young again!"

"No! Not really old yet, Victor—sixty, a little more than that, maybe, not older than that—"

"But it can't be stopped! The process accelerates, faster and faster! It won't stop until I find the key—until I reach the elixir—"

"I'll help you find it, Victor. Let me help you—let me call someone—"

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The pity in her voice seemed to enrage him.

"You can't help me! No one can help me now! Only Francesca—and she's dead!—get out of here, Louisa!"

When she failed to obey, he stepped towards her and closed his hand about her wrist; she felt a thrill of revulsion at the touch of his dry, gnarled fingers. He pushed her out of the room, slamming the door.

She looked down the stairwell, and saw the shambles he had made of the lower floors. Then she thought:

"I must get away. I can get help—for Victor's sake—" Only she knew it wasn't Victor she was thinking about. She wanted to escape the *thing* he was becoming . . .

She went hurriedly down the stairs. Overhead, she heard the thudding, crashing sounds of Victor's bedroom search.

She took the first coat she found in the downstairs closet, a long black velvet evening wrap too light for the chill night air. She went out, closing the door quietly, as if Victor could have heard the click of the latch amid the explosive sounds he was creating above.

The moonlight was bright on the pathway that lead her to the garage. She tugged at the door until it swung open; in the spacious interior she saw two cars, the rented sedan that had brought them to the castle, and the Contessa's own rarely-driven limousine, one of its wheels removed and resting against the garage wall.

She climbed into the sedan, shivering, and fumbled at the ignition. Then she gave a broken laugh, and slumped over the wheel.

There was no key. They had something more in common now, she and her husband; a missing key had trapped them both.

She sobbed quietly against the wheel, not thinking of the cold, or the passing of time.

She didn't raise her head until she heard the shuffling, scraping noise in the darkness.

"Who is it?" Louisa said.

She peered through the windshield, but the moonlight that had lit her passage to the garage was no longer visible.

The noise again.

"Who's there?" Louisa cried.

Then she remembered what a car could do, even without benefit of ignition keys. A car could shed light.

Her fingers found the button on the dashboard, and she punched it with the heel of her palm. Light flooded the open doorway of the garage, light so overpowering that the figure at the entrance threw up its arms in defense against the brilliant,

(*Continued on page 125*)

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Elixir for the Emperor

By JOHN BRUNNER

Illustrator FINLAY

. . . Now, for our second variation on the theme, a more realistic story of a wizened conjurer in ancient Rome, and a concoction neither generals nor Caesars take seriously.

THE roar of the crowd was very good to his ears, just as the warm Italian sunshine was good on his body after three years of slaving in the chill of Eastern Gaul. Few things made the general Publius Cinnus Metellus smile, but now, for moments only, his hard face relaxed as he made his way to the seat of honour overlooking the circus. There was winding of buccae by trumpeters of his own legions, but it was almost lost in the shout of welcome.

This was what the people liked from their generals: a profitable campaign, a splendid tri-

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umph, and a good day of games to finish with.

Slowly the cries faded into the ordinary hum of conversation as Metellus took his place and glanced around at his companions, acknowledging them with curt nods.

"Be good to see some decent games again, Marcus," he grunted at the plump, elderly man next to him. "If you'd had to sit through the third-rate makeshifts we suffer in Gaul . . . You did do as I asked you?"

"Of course," lisped Marcus Placidus. "Though why you were worried, I don't know. You brought enough livestock back with you to keep the arena awash for a week—some of those Germanic wolves, in particular. . . . No, you're paying well. You'll get the best games Rome has seen in years."

"I hope so. I certainly hope so." Metellus let his eyes rove across the gaudy crowd. "But I'm not going to take the risk of being cheated by some rascally lanista! And—things have changed here since I've been away. I feel out of touch."

He made the confession in a voice so low it reached no one but Marcus Placidus, and immediately looked as though he regretted uttering it at all.

Marcus pursed his fleshy lips. "Yes, there have been changes," he agreed.

After a brief pause, Metellus shifted on his chair. He said, "Well, now I'm here, where's the master of ceremonies to open the show?"

"They're waiting for the Emperor, of course," Marcus said with real or feigned surprise. "It would be an insult to begin without him."

"I didn't think he was coming!" Metellus exclaimed. His gaze fastened on the gorgeous purple-hung imperial box. "And—and nothing would please me better than to insult him, at that! Did he not insult me? You were there, Marcus! He said I bled my provinces white! A fine emperor, that wants no tribute for Rome! He doesn't even seem to know that you have to keep your foot on the neck of those—those barbarians! If you don't, you'll wake up one morning with your throat slit. I've seen."

He started forward on his chair, staring about him for the master of ceremonies. "We'll get going! I pay for the games, and I'm not to be kept waiting."

APOLOGETICALLY, Marcus laid a restraining hand on the general's arm. He said, "The people wouldn't stand for it, you know."

"Won't they? Since when would a Roman crowd prefer to sit broiling in the sun like chick-

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ens on a spit, rather than start the games?"

"Since you've been away, perhaps," Marcus said, and hauled his bulky body out of his chair. "Here he is now, anyway."

Scowling, Metellus also stood up. Shields clanged as the ranks of the guard completed the perfectly drilled movement of the salute, and the yell went up from the crowd. *The* yell—not just from the bottom of the lungs, but from the bottom of the heart. It went on. It lasted longer than the applause which had greeted Metellus, and seemed still to be gaining volume when the Emperor took his place.

As the roar echoed and re-echoed, the general clenched his fists. When, two years before, a courier had brought the news of Cinatus' accession, together with the warrant for the renewal of his proconsulship, Metellus had shrugged his shoulders. It was a wonder, of course, that they had ever allowed the old man to assume the imperial toga in succession to his childless nephew—whose short and bloody reign was memorable to Metellus for one thing: his managing to pick the plum of Eastern Gaul.

But with rival factions sprouting all over the Empire, it was probable the old man had been chosen because he wouldn't offend too many people. He certainly hadn't been expected to last long. Or to handle his impossible task so well . . .

"Aren't they ever going to stop screaming?" he snarled at Marcus. "Whose games are these, anyway?"

"You don't understand," was the only reply.

At that moment Cinatus, having made himself comfortable, caught Metellus's eye and shook his head in the Greek affirmative that was one of his few affectations. As though by magic the giant master of ceremonies popped into view in the arena.

"*At* last," grunted Metellus, and signalled for the games to be opened.

After the ritual preliminaries, the master of ceremonies took his stand before the imperial box. All talking died away as the crowd waited eagerly to hear what the first spectacle was to be.

"What *did* you decide to start with?" Marcus inquired behind his hand. "You were in two minds when I spoke to you yesterday."

"A good item, I think," Metellus answered. "It should put the crowd in the right mood straight away."

"A battle!" screamed the master of ceremonies. "Of he sun-baked south—against the frigid north! Six wild Germanic

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wolves from the forests of Eastern Gaul, brought hither by special command of the general—"

The next words were lost in an appreciative shout. Marcus gave a satisfied nod. "Ah, the wolves!" he commented. "I said they looked promising. Against what? Each other?"

"Not quite," Metellus said. "You'll see."

Once the master of ceremonies bellowed. "Against—!" He turned with a flourish, and all eyes followed the movement as a gate was thrown back to admit into the arena—head bowed to avoid a final blow from his jailer, clad only in a ragged kilt and worn sandals after the Egyptian pattern—an elderly dark-skinned man whose back was laced with the marks of the scourge. In one hand he clasped a sword, which he seemed not to know what to do with.

A gale of laughter went up from the crowd, in which Metellus joined rather rustily. "Excellent!" he muttered to Marcus. "I told my guards to find someone—some criminal—who'd look really ridiculous, and there he is. And afterwards, you see, there's a giant bull—"

"I warn you," said Marcus in a very flat voice, "the Emperor is not laughing."

The general swung around. Indeed, Cinatus' face was set in a stern frown. He whispered to one of his attendants, who called to the master of ceremonies over the front of the box.

"The Emperor desires to know with what crime this old man is charged!"

At a gesture, the ringmaster's assistants caught hold of the dark man and dragged him across the sand to answer for himself to Caesar. He seemed to have recovered his wits, and as he straightened and looked up he gave a passable salute with his sword.

"My name is Apodorius of Nubia, O Caesar! And the crime with which I am charged is one I freely confess. I hold that neither you nor any other man who has assumed the purple is a god!"

A low *o-o-oh!* went around the arena. Metellus sat back, satisfied. Surely Cinatus would not take that lightly.

But a hint of a smile played on the Emperor's lips. He spoke again to his aide, who relayed the question: "Why say you so?"

"Gods are not made by the words of men, and not all the talk in the world can create divinity!"

"By the same token, then," came the good-humored answer, "not all the talk in the world can unmake a god. Ringmaster, release this man, for it pleases Caesar to be merciful."

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Aghast, Metellus turned to Marcus. "Can I believe my ears? Does he intend to ruin my games for me, as well as insulting me about the way I ran my provinces? Surely the people won't stand for *this!*"

"They are standing for it," said Marcus calmly. "Can you hear any objections?"

Indeed there were very few, quickly silenced.

"But how is it possible?" Metellus demanded.

"You don't understand," said Marcus again. "They love their Emperor."

THOUGH the rest of the show proceeded without interruption, Metellus hardly paid any attention. He sat in his box with a scowl carved deep on his features. It was a relief when the last item ended and the sated crowd began to force their way towards the exits. Rising with a curt word of farewell, and an even curter salute to Cinatus, he ordered his retinue to clear a way to the street and stormed from the arena.

Following more slowly, looking thoughtful, Marcus Placidus listened to the comments of the departing audience. As he passed one young couple—an elegant, handsome youth accompanied by a pretty girl whom he had noticed in a front-row seat, naked as was the custom among the more distinguished courtesans—he eavesdropped with the skill of long practice.

"Good games," the youth said.

"Was it not gracious of Caesar to pardon that old man?" the girl countered.

"It was so! We have seen many wear the purple who would rather have ordered that the wolves' teeth be specially sharpened in his honor."

"Would that such an emperor could be with us forever!"

Marcus stopped dead in his tracks for the space of a heartbeat, and then continued forward. After a while, he did something quite out of keeping with his senatorial dignity: he began to hum a popular song which was going the rounds of the brothels.

He was humming it again when his litter was set down before the house of Metellus late that evening, but under the astonished gaze of his torch-bearer—who doubtless knew where the song was current—he composed himself and followed the path to the door.

Over the splashing of the little fountain in the atrium he heard an enraged yell in Metellus' parade-ground voice. "If that's someone to see me, tell him to come along with the rest of the clients in the morning!"

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"It is Senator Marcus Placidus, general," said the respectful nomenclator, and Metellus gave a grunt which the slave interpreted as permission to show the newcomer in.

He found the general reclining on a couch with a jug of Falernian wine at his side. A pretty Greek slave was massaging his neck.

"It had better be important, Marcus!" he said shortly.

"It is."

"All right. Make yourself comfortable. Pour the senator some of this filthy Falernian!" he added to the Greek girl, and she hastened to obey.

Marcus spilt a few drops in ritual libation and swigged a healthy draught of the wine. Then he set the cup aside, and took something from the folds of his toga. On the open palm of his pink hand he showed it to Metellus. It was a rose.

The general came to an abrupt decision. "Get out," he told the slave, and as she vanished soundlessly he added, "Well?"

"How would you like to be the next emperor, Metellus?"

"I know you too well, or I should think you'd been chewing ivy, like a Bacchante!" the general said caustically. "Or have you changed, like everything else in Rome?"

"I know what I'm saying," the senator answered. "You were probably going to point out that Cinatus is firmly ensconced—which is true. It's also true that the court, and all Rome, are less turbulent than they've been in my lifetime. But Cinatus *has* made enemies. About myself you know, I think."

"Something to do with a debt, wasn't it?" Metellus commented, and gave a harsh laugh.

"A trifling matter," Marcus told him. "A question of a few tens of thousands, that's all. He gave judgment against me, and I had to resort to most undignified methods to recover the money. If I hadn't needed it so badly—"

"You're being strangely candid."

"I wish you to see how I would benefit from a change of Caesar. There are others like me. Enough. I suspect they would agree to what I propose, if only because they think that once *we* have tumbled this immovable Caesar, it will be a matter of weeks before *they* tumble his successor and install their own favoirte. But I think they would find you hard to shift. Besides, you are popular with the people already. What more natural choice than our most successful general to take the purple next?"

"And how do you propose

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bringing this—minor miracle—to pass?"

Marcus told him.

At the end, Metellus had a faraway look in his eyes. "Suppose, though, Cinatus finds out from whom the suggestion originates? Will he not be suspicious?"

"Trust me for that, Metellus. I can get it to him so subtly that the actual proposition will come from someone he trusts implicitly—who will himself believe he is making the suggestion in good faith!"

"Ye-es," said Metellus doubtfully. He rose and began to pace the floor, head down, hands clasped behind his back. "But will he act on the proposal when it's made? Won't his cursed cynicism cause him to laugh the idea to scorn? Oh, Marcus, it will never succeed!"

"You doubt the success of my plan because you're a man used to direct action, unaccustomed to the twists and turns of court intrigue. I've already thought of the risk you mention. I'll forestall it by having Cinatus act to humor those who plague him with their concern."

"We'll consult the auspices," Metellus said suddenly. "If they're favorable, I'm with you."

Marcus gave a smile like a contented cat. He had not expected so swift a victory.

FIRST, he planted a rumor that Cinatus was a sick man. Since the Emperor was elderly, not to say old, people believed it. So often did he hear the whispered report repeated, so often did he himself pass it on, he almost believed it himself. Every time he saw Cinatus he studied him for signs of infirmity. However, the Emperor remained annoyingly hale.

So he planted his second seed. This was a single nebulous idea, whose path of growth had been chosen with extreme care. And as the idea was relayed to more and yet more people, it took exactly the form he had hoped.

And when it came finally to the ears of Cinatus himself, it came—as Marcus had promised Metellus—from a close friend who honestly believed he was making a valuable suggestion.

"If it were only possible for Caesar to remain with us for another twenty years, we might see Rome even greater than she has been in the past."

"Faugh!" said Cinatus. "I'm fifty-four years old, and if I last another five under the strain of your pestering, I'll have done well. Besides, who told you I wanted to put up with another twenty years of it?" And to drive home his point, he finished, "Anyway, the idea's ridiculous."

"Is it?" his old friend persist-

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ed. "There are stories of men who have stumbled across potions to confer long life and good health; in Asia they tell of a man who discovered such a drug —a herb—but a serpent stole it from him before he could use it. And the Jews claim that their ancestors lived to an age comparable with that of the heroes —seven hundred years!"

"I'm not a Jew, and I'm rather glad," said Cinatus feelingly, for at that time those intransigent inhabitants of Palestine were once more in spirited revolt against their Roman rulers. "Are you suggesting I should become one?" he added with a glare.

"Not at all," said the trusted friend, and then and there made the suggestion Marcus had so carefully planned for.

Cinatus didn't yield at once. But after a week's importunity by more and more of his oldest and closest friends, he gave in for the sake of a little peace and quiet.

"What did I tell you?" Marcus said smugly when he broke the news to Metellus. "Listen, I have the text of the proclamation here—it's to be made public tomorrow."

"How did you get hold of it?" the general demanded, and Marcus raised a reproving eyebrow at him.

"Metellus, do I inquire the secrets of your strategy? I think I may keep mine, then! But hear this. After the usual trifles about the graciousness of Caesar and how everyone wants him to reign a thousand years, it goes on:

" 'If any man bring to Rome some medicine which after trial prove to bestow long life and good health he shall be richly rewarded, but if any man bring a medicine which is useless he shall be banished from Rome, and if any man bring a medicine which is harmful he shall be punished and if any man bring a poison his life shall be forfeit.' "

"Hmmm!" Metellus rubbed his chin. "Three penalties for one reward! Do men bet against such odds in this strange Cinatus-altered Rome of ours? I mean, will there be any candidates at all?"

"Beyond a doubt," said Marcus confidently. "They may not love Cinatus as much as they'll say they do, but they'll come—to puff some cult or other, or for the hope of gain, or for notoriety . . . And anyway I've arranged a steady supply of candidates to keep the interest up."

Metellus gave a reluctant smile. "Well, so Rome is full of sorcerers and favor-seeking acolytes of the mystery cults—then what?"

"Why, then we try their po-

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tions on some slaves, do we not? For instance . . . You're aware that Cinatus has a trusted body-slave, a Greek, called Polyphemus for his one eye?"

"I've seen him," agreed Metellus.

"In your name I've offered him his manumission if he helps us. Cinatus won't release him—he depends on him too much. It's the most serious mistake he's made.

"Now this Polyphemus thinks he can outwit me. Of course, I have no intention of letting him go free with such a secret, and he suspects this, but he wants his freedom so much he's willing to gamble on the chance of blackmailing me afterwards." Marcus sat back with a pleased expression.

"What secret are you talking about?"

"Why—! See: when *our* sorcerer, *our* doctor, comes to offer his potion to the Emperor, it will be something no more harmful than water."

"Not so harmless, that," grunted Metellus, thinking of the stinking stagnant liquid he had often encountered in the field. "But go on."

"Well, that's a detail we can settle. Make it a tasteless powder to be administered in wine, if you prefer." Marcus dismissed the point with an airy wave. "But after it's been tried on slaves and proved at worst innocuous, it will then be tested on Polyphemus, who has promised to assert it makes him feel fit and well. I should say he's promised also that for the next few weeks he will feign occasional sickness, and make Cinatus worried about losing him.

"But then it will be the task of this same one-eyed slave to give the potion to Cinatus—he'd trust no one else to administer it. And what he gives him will be—uh—stronger than water."

"I see. You're devious, Marcus—but clever, I grant! So we shall have to find the culprits: the pretended doctor, and while we're about it, why not the one-eyed slave? Yes, neat and tidy, like a good plan of battle!" In an access of uncharacteristic enthusiasm Metellus clapped his hands. Then his mood changed.

"We'd better move swiftly, though, Marcus! For if I mistake not people are beginning to forget the tribute my campaigns brought to Rome."

"We shall be swift enough," smiled Marcus, and re-rolled the papyrus on which was inscribed the proclamation even now being carried to the four corners of the world.

Long, long before the sages of Egypt and the Druid mystics of Western Europe heard the news and began their preparations,

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the word came to Apodorius the Nubian as he shivered over a wood fire in a stinking little inn beside the Tiber.

He had travelled very far. He had sat at the feet of philosophers in Athens retailing the wisdom of their ancestors like parrots; he had bowed in the temples of Alexandria and the sacred groves of Asia; he had been initiated into mystery cults from Persia to the Pillars of Hercules. He had acquired very much knowledge. In fact, as he disputed anew with sages in every place he visited, he had begun to suspect that few men anywhere had studied so widely and learned so much.

And the suspicion had given him a certain moral courage.

The fact that a whim of Caesar had saved him an agonized death in the arena counted little with him. He cared more that he had sensed in the elderly Cinatus a quality unique among the many rulers he had seen: hard-headed common sense.

Apodorius, though Romans had almost cost him his life, was not blind to the benefits Roman rule had brought to the world. He had been in many countries enjoying more peace and greater prosperity than ever under their own governments. But should Caesar be weak, his deputies corrupt, the Empire could —did—bring misery.

The world needed the Empire. The Empire needed a good Caesar. Apodorius made up his mind.

PUBLIUS Cinnus Metellus *Augustus*—Caesar himself, latest of the wearers of the imperial purple—yawned. If he had been able to find a way around the right of all citizens to appeal in person to the Emperor, he would have done so. He hated dealing with their petty little squabbles, their disputes over money, their pretended claims against judges he had himself appointed.

Marcus Placidus felt differently, of course. He enjoyed watching people's minds at work, weaving their devious plans. Metellus prevented his face from lapsing into a frown —just in time—as the senator himself entered the audience hall.

Too clever by half. Something might have to be done about him . . .

"Well?" he demanded.

"I think," Marcus murmured, "you may be interesetd in the first person who craves audience today. Look, O Caesar!"

The doors opened. Through them stepped a dark-skinned man, very thin, old, ragged, yet bearing himself with a cretain dignity. To his chest he clutched something reddish-brown—a

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pottery jar sealed with a lump of wax. He bowed vaguely in Metellus' direction; it was obvious that his sight was failing, and an usher-slave had to set him moving towards the throne.

Metellus gave Marcus a puzzled glance. How a down-and-out like this had ever got as far as the audience chamber was what worried him. He thought he had placed enough barriers—financially, if not legally—between himself and the common people to prevent such intrusions.

"I see nothing interesting about this scarecrow," he snapped.

"No? Think back, O Caesar! Think what that jar he clutches may contain! Do you not now recall a certain day at the circus, following your triumph—?"

"That Nubian? The one Cinatus pardoned—may the empty-headed fool drown in Styx! Why, of course!" Metellus snapped his fingers. "Ap—something—Apodorius!"

The Nubian, apparently more by guesswork than sight, for his eyes were dull, halted facing him.

"Caesar remembers me?" he said with a faint air of astonishment.

"Indeed we do," Metellus confirmed grimly. Watching, Marcus allowed a sly, barely visible smile to creep across his face.

As though vaguley troubled by the sound of Caesar's voice, Apodorius hesitated, lovingly stroking the earthenware pot he cradled to his chest. Seeming to draw confidence from it, he spoke up.

"I come in answer to a proclamation of Caesar more than a year ago, which said that if a man brought medicine to Rome for the health of Caesar he would be rewarded. I want no reward. You gave me my life, and in return"—he thrust his jar forward convulsively—"I bring you everlasting life!"

THERE was a long slow silence, which soughed through the hall like an ice-cold wind.

It was broken by an undignified gurgle of laughter from Marcus. Metellus shut him up with a murderous glare and leaned forward.

"Why have you so long delayed, Apodorius?" he asked silkily.

"I beg Caesar's indulgence! It was often hard to come by the ingredients—I had to search far and wide."

"And why, seeing you have this medicine, are you yourself old, and sick, and nearly blind?"

"The ingredients were costly," said the old man apologetically. "I had little money. I could

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buy no more than would make one dose . . . ." He tapped the pot. "And that one dose is for Caesar, not for me."

Metellus slapped the arm of his throne. "Know, O stupid sage, that your kind is not welcome in Rome!"

"But—but there are no others of my kind, Caesar. None but I could have brewed this elixir!"

"If your eyes were open," said Metellus, rising to his feet so that he towered over the Nubian, "you would know that I am not Cinatus who spared your worthless life in the arena, but Metellus who ordered you into it! And sorcerers like you are unwelcome because one of your breed came to Rome offering an elixir which proved to be poison and from whose effects Cinatus—Augustus—died."

At each of the last three words Apodorius winced, as if under successive blows. Slowly, slowly he lowered his cherished pottery jar. He stood very still, a broken man.

"Guards!" said Metellus. Two brawny soldiers closed on the Nubian. "Take that jar from him."

A fist moved swiftly and seized it.

"Break the seal and pour this conjurer's muck down his own throat!"

This galvanized the old man. He stiffened, and babbled the beginnings of a plea. A broad plam shut his mouth for him.

"We notice you are less eager to drink your elixir than to have Caesar drink it," Metellus said dryly. "Go ahead, soldier!"

Forcing Apodorius' mouth open, the man spilt rather than poured the clear greyish liquid from the jar between the old man's bare gums. A quick jab in the stomach made him swallow convulsively, and again, and until the jar was empty.

"Let him go," Metellus directed, and Apodorius slumped to the the floor in a faint.

"As I thought," Marcus murmured. "Oh, the subtlety of these philosophers!"

Metellus ignored him. He was too pleased with his own acumen to listen to self-praise from the stout senator. "Now take that bundle of skin and bones and dump it in the Tiber," he ordered the guards. "And let me hear no more of sorcerers."

"*Just* as I thought," Marcus murmured again, and Metellus rounded on him.

"And what do you mean by that?" he demanded.

"Think, O Caesar! Is it truly possible that a man anywhere in the Empire should have failed to hear of your succession? No, doubtless this man thought that by pretending he was so blind he thought he was offering his potion to Cinatus, he would make

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you as gullible as his benefactor and induce you to take his poison."

"Then why should he not have come sooner?" frowned Metellus.

The question troubled him for a few moments. Then he dismissed it and called for wine, wishing he had conceived a more spectacular fate than mere drowning in the Tiber for this skilful would-be murderer.

CONSCIOUSNESS returned after what seemed like the passage of ages to Apodorius. He struggled up from his lying position before he had taken in his surroundings, noting as he did so that for the first time in many months he could not feel his usual twinge of rheumatism.

His eyes, too, were clearer. Though the light was bad, he could see he was in a stone-walled cell; its ceiling oozed green damp. A grille of metal bars cut him off from another, identical cell, where a man with one eye sat counting the fingers of his left hand.

Seeing the Nubian rise, however, he let the hand fall to his side and cautiously came to the bars separating the cells. When he spoke, it was with a strong Greek accent.

"You're the last of the conjurers, aren't you? You're going into the Tiber tonight, aren't you? Oh yes! You've come back, and I knew you would, because I'm still here, and I'm trapped the same as you are."

He talked with a kind of explosive bitterness in which insanity rang dully like a counterfeit coin on a money-changer's table.

"Marcus Placidus did for us both very nicely," the one-eyed man went on, changing his tone to a more conversational level. "I thought I was cleverer than he was, but I was wrong, and he proved it to me. He proved it slowly, for a long, lo-ong, LO-O-ONG TIME!"

His voice rose to a screech. As though challenging Apodorius to doubt his words he thrust the stump of his right arm through the grille. It had no fingers left. The thumb was a mere blob of flesh, and the skin from palm to elbow was seared with the marks of the torturer's iron.

"Who are you?" said Apodorius.

"Polyphemus," said the Greek, and giggled. "Only I'm luckier than the real Polyphemus. Marcus didn't put out my eye with a hot stick, oh no! Marcus isn't as clever as Odysseus, but I'm not as clever as Marcus."

Abruptly he altered his tone again, and now cocked his head so that his one-sided gaze could study his new companion's face. "You come too late to poison

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Caesar, you know," he said. "I did it a long time ago. Marcus told me he'd give me my manumission for it, but he lied—he was clever! He proved it," he added inconsequentially, and thrust his left arm through the grille also so that he could count its still complete set of fingers by touching them one by one to the blob of his right thumb.

Apodorius felt facts come together in his mind. Hoping against hope for a few minutes' clarity from the Greek's disordered mind, he spoke as things presented themselves to him.

"It was a plot of Marcus Placidus' to poison Cinatus. You pretended to be a doctor and—no, that's not right. You said you knew I'd be back. You were imprisoned here with the man who posed as a doctor and brought the poison, and who was put up to it by Marcus Placidus—and hence presumably by Metellus. You were one of Cinatus' slaves, and you were promised your freedom if you substituted poison for the elixir."

"You know all that," Polyphemus said. "You brought the poison to me before you came to Caesar with water. Water! The Tiber is full of water, and that's where you'll be thrown tonight."

Footsteps sounded in an echoing corridor. Polyphemus moved away from the grille and listened intently. "I think they're coming to take you away," he said, unholy joy in his voice. "But you'll be back. Sooner or later you'll be back. I'm the proof, you know—the senator told me so! If ever he can't handle Metellus, he said, he'd use me to prove it was a plot of Metellus' to poison Caesar. I hope he doesn't have to use me as proof, because they torture slaves to make them talk, and I've been tortured. Did you know?"

He finished with a pathetic attempt to reassure himself. "But Marcus will be able to handle Metellus! Marcus is clever! Marcus is clever! Marcus is—"

"Shut your mouth, you!"

Apodorius turned, not too quickly, to see that the speaker was an officer of the guard who had halted beyond the grating of the door into his cell. Bolts jarred back as the soldiers with him heaved on them. The officer stepped inside.

"So you're awake!" he said. "Your poison can't have been very powerful. Still, no matter—it will please Caesar when I tell him you were still conscious to enjoy the sensation of drinking Mother Tiber." He gestured to the soldiers, and they moved forward purposefully. The Nubian offered no resistance.

When he had had his arms lashed behind his back and his ankles so hobbled that he could barely stumble along, he was

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jabbed into the corridor at the point of a sword. The sounds of Polyphemus counting—up to five, and then again up to five—died slowly in the distance.

"If it weren't ridiculous," the officer muttered, "I'd say you were actually better for that muck you swallowed! Hah!"

He swung open a door, and they came out on a stone ledge under which the river ran chuckling. It was very dark, and the night breeze had a chill to it.

"*Vale*, brewer of elixirs!" the officer said, and one of the soldiers drove the point of his sword deep into Apodorius' buttock. Yelling, he plunged into the water, and vanished.

The soldiers waited long enough to be sure he would not surface, and dispersed with no further thought of the matter.

But deep in the swift-flowing river Apodorius was hoarding his breath, conscious mainly of how glad he was they had not sewn him in a sack before they threw him in.

AT *this* hour?" said Marcus Placidus irritably. "Who?"

"He is a Nubian, senator," the slave explained, unaware of the effect he was about to have on Marcus' state of mind. "His name is Apodorius. He is very wet and muddy, and if he had not sworn on all the gods that it was a matter of life and death I should have put him back in the street."

"Wine," said Marcus faintly. "Help me to a couch. And quick —*get that man in here!*"

"I have come, senator," said the unmistakable voice of Apodorius the Nubian from the curtained doorway. Marcus' eyes bulbed in his fat face, he gasped, and the slave anxiously aided him to his couch.

"I regret the state in which I call on you," the Nubian went on. "But Tiber is at the best of times an unclean river, and I had some trouble breaking free of my bonds."

"Come—come here," whispered Marcus. "Let me—no! You, slave! Touch this man and see if he is substantial!"

Astonished, the slave obeyed. "He is warm flesh," he reported. "But slippery with mud, as you see."

"What do you want with me?" Marcus wheezed.

"I have a grim kind of business with Caesar," Apodorius answered dryly. "But why should I go to him when it is known to all Rome that the words are his and the thoughts are yours?"

Marcus could not help preening himself a little. Apodorius noted the fact and hid a smile.

"As you see, senator, my elixir, which you took for a lie, was potent enough. So I have come to

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you to offer a bargain. A fair one, I think. You are in a position to give me what I most desire: revenge upon Metellus for what he did to me today. Likewise I am able to give you what you want—what I already have. I don't think you will care much which Caesar wears the purple when you wield the power."

"The bargain?" Marcus had completely forgotten his terror of a moment past.

"Destroy Metellus, and I will give you my elixir."

Greed lit the senator's eyes, but he pulled at his lower lip and pretended scorn. "Your elixir! How do I know it's valuable—not a sham? How do I know you weren't pretending to be old and blind and rheumaticky, and sloughed the appearance of age as easily as you slipped your bonds in the Tiber?"

Apodorius winced and rubbed a chafed ankle. "Speak not of that as 'easy', senator!" he complained. "But I have proof for you. I have taken so great a dose of my medicine that I think I am truly growing young again. See!" He opened his mouth and indicated his visibly toothless gums. "I feel an ache which may portend . . ."

Marcus rubbed his finger along the shrivelled skin till he was satisfied there could be no pretence. When Apodorius cut his first new tooth three days later, he sealed the bargain without more ado. In truth, what was it to him if Metellus went down into the shadows? An immortal man could become the power behind not one Caesar, but all Caesars!

Delighted, Apodorius watched the man grow drunk on the heady liquor of his dream.

He asked for what he needed, and Marcus supplied it. The senator's desire for secrecy suited him; in a quiet room at the back of the house he worked with the strange materials Marcus bought him, and weeks slipped by.

After two months Marcus was at the limit of patience, and Apodorius judged it unwise to make him wait any longer.

Accordingly, he waited on him when he returned from the Senate, and to his fevered demand for news of progress gave a simple headshake of affirmation.

"Yes, I have prepared the elixir again. What have you done towards your side of the bargain?"

Marcus rolled his eyes to heaven and clasped his hands before him. He whispered, "I have arranged that the next time Caesar goes to the circus a pillar below his box will be loosened. An elephant will be goaded into terror and caused to break the pillar down. If Metellus is not trampled to death, the care

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of such doctors as I have recommended to him can be counted on to send him to join the shades."

MARCUS entered the room where the Nubian had been working, and stoppped dead. Everything had been taken from it —all the pans, jars, braziers—all but a single small table on which rested a crock containing a greyish fluid. His eyes lit as he recognized the color of the liquid that had been forced down Apodorius' throat.

He stretched out his hand towards it, and then checked himself. "No!" he croaked. "You first! Sip it before me—and do no more than sip it, mind!"

"Have no fear," said Adoporius quietly. "I have made enough this time for more than one dose—for three, perhaps four." He picked up the crock.

Marcus eyes, alert for any hint of deception, followed his movements minutely as he drank three slow mouthfuls of the stuff. Then he replaced the crock, and rested his hand on the table to steady himself.

"You may feel a little giddy at first," he gasped. "Remember, when I was forced to drink before Caesar I fell in a faint. But you are not so old and weak as I was then."

His breathing grew easier and he straightened. Convinced there were no ill-effects, and impatient beyond endurance, the senator seized the crock and began to gulp at it.

When he set it down, it was with a crash that shattered it and sent the shards flying across the floor. A burning began in his stomach. Dark veils crept over his vision as he sought to fix his eyes on the Nubian's face.

Through a rushing torrent of pain he heard Apodorius' voice, very cool, very detached.

"You are a dead man, senator."

"What?" he gasped. *"What?"*

"I have drunk the elixir—the real elixir. You have not. In that crock was the strongest poison I have ever found. I drank it—and I live. But you die."

Marcus Placidus clutched his belly as though he would squeeze the poison from it like water from a sponge. But the blueness was already showing in his lips and around his fingernails. In a moment he could stand no longer, and crumpled to the floor. His eyes rolled; his chest barrelled out in a final gasp for air. And he died.

"But that will make no difference to Metellus," Apodorius said to the corpse. "Not yet. Even if his doctors save him after tomorrow's accident at the circus. I am sure, senator, you were sufficiently skilled in flattery to let him think your decisions were his own. By himself—well, he is no Cinatus!"

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And, his thoughts ran on, his fall will probably bring the Empire down . . . Another wave of murdered Caesars, and then barbarian invasions from the outskirts of the Empire—the ultimate collapse of so mighty an edifice would take centuries, but it was now inevitable.

And afterwards?

"We shall see," mused Apodorius. Then he corrected himself with wry amusement. "Or rather: I shall see!"

He dipped his finger in a pool of poison which had remained in a fragment of the broken crock, and thought of the care he had taken too get its color exactly the same as the real elixir. He still felt queasy from the three mouthfuls he had taken. Enough of that poison would perhaps pierce his invulnerability.

Rising, he spoke to the air.

"Does it make you smile, Cinatus Augustus—there in the land of shades? You gave me my life, true, and I've avenged you. But Metellus outdid your gift! He gave me everlasting life, and because of it I have destroyed him. Do you understand, Caesar? I think you do. And I think if I had come to you, you would have turned me away.

"Perhaps, then, I would have been offended. But now I know why I brewed my elixir for an emperor, and not for me."

He stared down at the poison in the broken crock, and did not see it. He was contemplating the endless centuries ahead of him, and feeling himself grow cold.

"Next time I brew," he said, "which will I choose? This? Or a renewal of the other?"

THE END

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The Man Who Found Proteus

By ROBERT ROHRER

There's nothing very strange about a lonely old prospector talking to his mule. But there's something amiss when the mule talks back.

JAKE came running out of the mine like all hell and stopped just outside and looked back inside and stood panting into the mouth of the cave for a good while. Jake's eyes were wide open and his face was white under the dirt, just like he was scared. As a matter of fact, he was scared.

Jake stood there looking into the mine with his shirt front going up and down and the hair on his neck going mostly up, and the mine was dark so Jake could not see a damned thing, which was fine with him. He'd see enough ee-nough.

Finally, when it looked like nothing was going to come out of the mine and get him, Jake stopped panting and started thinking. This was a bad move, especially for Jake, and the situation got pretty unhealthy. Jake started thinking that maybe he was crazy. He was getting old, and he'd been living out there on the edge of the desert for a long time with this mine that didn't look like it was going to be any great shakes, and he started thinking, "Well, maybe I'm goin' crazy." After all, you don't see a chunk of rock get up and walk away just every day. You don't see anything like that at all, unless you're sort of off, so Jake started thinking, "Maybe I'm goin'—crazy."

Jake was standing there thinking and his old mule was standing there thinking, too, Jake had one of those old mules just like every dried-up prospector has, and Jake said to the mule, "Mule, I think mebbe I'm goin' crazy."

Mule said, "Mebbe y'are, Jake."

Jake said, "Gawd!" and he ran pretty quick into his shack. When he'd closed the door he sat down on that half-rotten cot he had and

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he began to think some more, and things got unhealthy again. Jake started puling his hair out and hitting himself on the head; he was tolerably upset.

Finally Jake got up enough grit to look out the window of his shack and see if Mule was still out there. There was Mule, standing out on the dead orange ground, chewing on something that Jake couldn't imagine what it was because all the food was in the back of the shack.

Mule looked up at Jake with two solid black eyes and hollered, "Hey Jake, where's muh food, I'm *hongry*."

Jake yelled out the window, "You ain't gonna get no food from *me*, you dam' mule!"

"Aw-w-w," said Mule, and turned into a trickle of water and went splish-splash into the mine.

Jake said, "Gawd!" and was about ready to stand on his head when he thought, "Hold on there, Jake, get a-holt of yourself," which was the first healthy thought he'd had in a good time. "There's gotta be one o' them logical explanations for this, asides that I'm loco, which mebbe I am," he thought, and he sat down on the dirt floor and concentrated, hard.

AFTER a while he started a headache from all that hard thinking, and he still couldn't figure out a logical explanation for a rock getting up and walking off, or a mule talking and then turning into water. Jake muttered, "That ain't no way for a ol' mule to act," and he kept on thinking, *that ain't no way for a ol' mule to act, that ain't no way for a ol' mule to act;* and then he got a pretty good-sized idea for his type brain. Maybe that mule he saw out there *wasn't* a mule.

Jake jumped up and went around back of the shack where he kept Mule hitched up, and sure enough, Mule's bridle was there all hitched to the hitching post and dangling in the air, and there were some white mule-bones lying on the hard baked earth.

Jake got a nasty look on his face and said, "Somebody et my mule." He and Mule had been pretty good friends, Mule was the only one left from the old days before the others had died, and now Mule was gone and old Jake was all alone. Jake was pretty mad, and he stomped around past the three crosses to the front of the shack again because he wanted to get his old shotgun.

He stopped cold before he went inside because somebody had written in big red-crayon letters across the face of the shack, I'M HUNGRY." This made Jake pretty sure that there was some no-good lout out there who was running around eating mules and who ought to have his head blown off, so Jake walked into the shack

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and loaded up his shotgun and put the box of shells in his pocket.

Just when he was about to go outside again there were a couple of knocks on the door, and Jake shot his gun straight at the door. That pretty well tore the door to hell, and Jake didn't hear anybody yelling so he cussed because he figured he'd missed and ruined the door for nothing.

He loaded up again and pushed open what was left of that door. Right away his mouth fell open, because out there on the ground in big red clear block-type letters was *I'M HUNGRY!* There were even a block-type exclamation point and a block-type underline.

Jake said, "Wha-a-a-t the hell?" Right while he watched, those letters changed around until they said, I'LL EAT *ANYTHING!*

Jake said, "Rg-l-s-p-ch?" which was a pretty complicated word for Jake.

The letters sat there for a while and finally they changed and said, WELL?

BYthat time Jake had gotten a little bit of control over himself, and he said, "Who the Bill Hill Blazes are you, anyhow?"

The letters wriggled around and said, I AM PROTEUS. They wriggled around again and said, I HAVE COME A LONG WAY. They wriggled around again and said, I DO NOT KNOW WHERE THE HELL I AM. They wriggled around again and said, I AM LOST. I AM STARVING. They wriggled around again and said, GIVE ME FOOD, CHOP-CHOP.

"You already et muh mule," said Jake, since he'd figured out that this Proteus must have eaten Mule.

YOUR MULE WAS FULL OF LICE./I NEED SOMETHING WITH VITAMINS AND/MINERALS TO GET ME OUT OF THIS/HOLE.

"Well, you ain't gettin' nothin' from me," said Jake, and he let those leters have it right in the vowels with his shotgun. The letters got together in one heap and hopped back into the mine.

Jake walked right up to the mine and squinted into it and shined his flashlight into it. He was so scared by that time that he didn't know he was scared any more. And he was angry about Mule, too.

Jake said, "Hey! You in there?"

Nobody said anything in the mine, so Jake took his shotgun and shot it into the mine a couple of times.

Almost right away something went *bam*! *bam*! in the mine, and Jake's old felt hat got pulled right off his head and he felt a breeze across his left cheek. He yelled, "Hey! Hey!" He turned around to get the hat but there wasn't much left of it so he loaded up and charged straight into

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the mine. If he'd looked back he'd have seen the little shot pellets that had torn his hat and almost his cheek bouncing along right behind him. They finally passed him, but he didn't see them because it was too dark.

Jake got in to about the place where that rock had gotten up and he saw something he sure hadn't seen before. There was a big crack in the floor—it wasn't really *big*, but it was pretty wide and it looked like it went down a long, long way. Jake shined his flashlight down into it and he couldn't see anything like a bottom anywhere. There was a kind of green slime all the way down the side of the crack.

All this sort of made Jake shiver, because he wasn't a fissure man, and so he walked on into the cave, waving his flashlight all over the place before he took a step.

All of a sudden a STOP sign jumped up in front of Jake. Jake let the sign have it with both barrels, but all the little pieces hopped back together and turned into a rattlesnake.

Jake swung his shotgun down holding the barrels and he missed the snake and that took care of the shotgun. He started stomping around after the snake—he had on high leather boots, so he didn't have to worry—and when he finally got his foot right smack on the snake it wasn't a snake any more, it was a two-inch nail, and Jake cussed like the devil and jumped up and down with one leg.

The nail turned into a rubber ball and bounced away. Jake hobbled after the ball as fast as he could. Finally he caught the ball and he went *wham* right down on the ground, because it wasn't a rubber ball any more, it was a portable hi-fi-stereo combination radio-TV set with built-in jacks for earphones and a war movie going on.

JAKE lay there with his hand stuck underneath the TV-radio. Then the war movie cut off and an announcer came on and said, "We now have a special announcement. Everybody needs vitamins. You need vitamins, I need vitamins. I need vitamins more than you do, because I've had to do without them for three thousand years. I've been crawling around under the ground every day, day in and day out. It's hot, sweaty work, and I get tired and dragged out. Won't you contribute your vitamins to the Vitamins for Half-Dead Greek Gods Association/5763 Red Lane/ Rum-Tum-Tummy, Nebraska? Thank you." A Messerschmidt went *wham*! into a tree.

Jake got red in the face and said, "No! No! No! I ain't gonna give you any of my grub! I'm gonna get my gasoline and burn you up, *that's* what I'm gonna

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do!" He jerked his hand from under the TV set and stood up.

Right away he had to duck again, because the TV set turned into a locomotive and went pounding out of the mine at full throttle. Jake heard a lot of crashing outside, and he guessed what it was. He showed his teeth and limped out into the open heat of the sun.

The back of his shack was flying up into the air board by board. By the time Jake got back there, all the tins were either open and hollowed out, or gone. There were the big letters on the floor: AND I'M STILL HUNGRY, TOO!! The letters turned into an MG and va-*voomed* back into the mine.

Jake didn't stop to think about what the thing's still being hungry might mean. His foot hurt, and his hand hurt, and he was mad as hell. He waded into what was left of his cellar and started searching for the gasoline cans.

By the time he found the cans, the sun was almost down and the light was dim. Jake's eyes weren't any too good anyway, and he walked toward a big black spot he thought was the mine and when he got to it it wasn't there any more, it was a little more to his left. Jake shook his head and flicked on his flashlight and went inside, muttering "I'm gonna burn you *up*" all the time.

At first he didn't notice, but the farther and farther that Jake got into the mine, the less and less that it looked like a mine to him. There was something funny about the walls, and maybe about the ground. All of a sudden old Jake got a pretty scary idea, and his chest got all knotted up inside, and he turned around to scram out of there.

Just then the mine started shaking, and the ground sort of pushed up, and Jake fell down. He didn't even have a chance to get close to the mouth of that cave before CHOMP! Rugged.

THE END

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Seed of Eloraspon

By MANLY BANISTER

Conclusion

Synopsis of Part One

Three years have passed since Jefferson Jarvis first set foot upon the mysterious world of Eloraspon. Eamus Brock, leader of the race of mutants known as Magnanthropus, had commanded Jarvis to seek out the ancient city of Surandanish to wrest from it the scientific secrets of the Mighty for the benefit of the colony of homo sapiens *Brock had transplated from Earth to Eloraspon. Jarvis envisioned a new Earth—a new civilization growing upon the remains of the Mighty, the first Magnanthropus, who had flourished upon Eloraspon countless ages ago.*

Jarvis sailed southward upon the Elorasponian sea—the Dimgal Abzu. Suddenly he sighted land ahead, from which strongly came to him the beacon-call of Surandanish, which he "heard" by means of his Mag senses within his innermost being. At almost the same time, he was attacked by a many-oared sailing vessel. Jarvis succeeded in eluding the craft, but his own boat was dashed to pieces on the rocks of the Dimgalian coast.

The beacon-call of Surandanish lured Jarvis into the forest, where he was forced to fight for his life against hideous monsters. From the scrub-covered hills beyond the forest Jarvis saw the Eeima, whom he had known of old: human-like creatures barely a foot high fluttering on many-hued butterfly wings in the morning sun. These welcomed him in the name of Eluola, the butterfly maid who had aided Jarvis in his search for Eamus Brock when he had first come to Eloraspon. Eluola was now Great Mother of the Eeima, Layer of Eggs in the Mothering Pits. Jarvis felt they were as anxious as he that he reach Surandanish.

The beacon-call then led him into a desert. There he killed the scarlet ultul with the help of a

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warrior maiden, Ilil, princess of Gipar, who was cast ashore here in the land of the Tharn after her entire ship's company had been destroyed by Tharn in the same vessel that had attacked Jarvis at sea. The two journey together and Jarvis learns Ilil also is a Mag. Unconsciously, they commune mind to mind as they speak. By this means, Jarvis actually learns to speak Eloraspo-nese—the one language prevalent throughout this world—and Ilil learns English.

He also learns that Ilil is fleeing from the immortal Bronze Men of Surandanish, who rule as gods over the Lulu, or people. The Bronze Men long ago prohibited the Lulu, except for the Tharn, ever to dwell again in the ancient, glowing cities of the Mighty. At regular intervals they appear as if out of nowhere to examine the newborn, to choose some, and to leave them with the mark of the Dingir, a red, twisting serpent upon the right shoulder. Those thus marked are allowed to live with their people until they reach their majority. The Dingir then come for them and take them away.

Ilil bore such a mark upon her shoulder and she had fled her own land of Gipar to escape the Bronze Men.

Ilil and Jarvis are ambushed by four Tharn, seven-foot giants with blue skins, bald heads and puffed, shapeless features from which protrude ivory tusks that curve outward and downward nearly to the collarbone. Jarvis kills three, and the fourth, Thork, yields. Jarvis spares him and Thork the Tharn becomes his friend and warrior-companion. Meanwhile another Tharn overpowered Ilil and carried her away to Drahubba for the Day of Sharing at the court of the Lugal, ruler of the Tharn.

Thork, it turns out, was once a Giparian, who was enslaved by the Tharn. To escape, he had stolen the tharn-drug which gave him the shape of a Tharn. But now he must forever remain a Tharn. For three days without the drug means death, and tharn is available only in Kullab, land of the Tharn. Jarvis and Thork reach Drahubba, where they are imprisoned in a dungeon.

Here Jarvis learns that the ancient Mighty needed neither doors nor windows; by means of their Mag senses they had been able to pass through specially constructed walls at will. In this manner, Jarvis discovers in the cell next to them another Earthman, Valdez the Peruvian, who had accidentally fallen through a "hole in space" a few weeks before into the world of Eloraspon! To his astonishment, Jarvis learns that Earth was not destroyed in the Great Catastro-

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phe. He may some day be able to return! His zeal to reach Surandanish is fired anew.

They escape through a hollow central cylinder in the building and enter the palace of the Lugal. They search the women's quarters for Ilil. They find, instead, the beautiful maid Rani of Tukulta. Thork groans in his great, blue chest, for the maid is his daughter whom he has not seen in ten long years. Ilil is in the Lugal's audience chamber, with the other prisoners and loot of the past month, awaiting the Sharing.

In the throne room, as Skal claims his reward for capturing Ilil, Thork challenges him and kills him. Jarvis leaps to seize Ilil in his arms. At that moment, a shout rings out, "Stay, Jeff Jarvis!" *The Dingir! A trio of Bronze Men order the throne room cleared. He then orders Jarvis and Ilil to accompany them. But Jarvis, aware of the fear and hatred shared by the Lulu and Tharn alike for the Dingir, resists the command. As the Bronze Man reaches for his belt, Jarvis hurls his axe, cleaving the giant creature's skull.*

At once, the other two lifted their fallen commander. Ordering the Lugal to hold Jarvis and Ilil against the time of their return, they retreat through the wall into the central cylinder of the building.

Jarvis' successful rebellion against the authority of the Dinger, however, has given the Lugal ideas. Before his eyes, he has seen one of the immortals slain! The great Tharn no longer fears the Dingir and recaptures Jarvis, Thork and Valdez. He condemns them to death by the slul. Jarvis' last view of Ilil is her frail form in the gross arms of the Lugal as that great Tharn carries her out of the throne room. Then he is thrust and prodded by sword points to the topmost floor of the great building, and out upon the open roof. They are marooned beneath an eternity of space to await the coming of night and the slul. What are the slul? Jarvis neither knows nor cares. His brooding thoughts are preoccupied with visions of the fair Ilil in the Lugal's ugly arms. Valdez, too, worries for Rani, for whom he has taken affection. Thork is resigned to death, as a warrior going into battle is resigned. There is no escape from the unutterable might of the slul.

Jarvis stiffens. Like the thunder of a wild Wagnerian opera, a mighty sensation sweeps through his being—the soul-song of the slul! Heard only by means of his Mag senses, the slul are still distant, but Jarvis' very being shakes with the welling flood of indescribable hate and rage—the soul-battering hymn of power that bursts from the horde of

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the slul. Horrid and ferocious though this psychic power is, Jarvis recognizes in it a kinship relating him through his Mag being to those fluttering shadows in the night. He replies with an answering song, a call as from deity to deity, that wings forth upon the stillness of the moonlit night to say to the slul that he waits. . . .

THE slul are coming," Jarvis said to his companions, "but don't be afraid."

Valdez shivered. "Why not? Where are they?"

Jarvis gestured toward the mountains. "That way. They are my friends."

Valdez looked at him strangely, his expression a mixture of scorn and disbelief in the pallid light of the city.

"I think I hear something," Thork put in, "like the whistle of wind on millions of wings!"

Jarvis nodded. "I was telling Valdez they come. But they are our friends. My friends, at least, but they will not harm you because of me."

Valdez said, "You don't look crazy, Jarvis. Who—or what—are these 'friends' of yours?"

"It is a long story," Jarvis said, "and when we get away from here I will explain it all to you. I can say this much: There are two types of beings inhabiting this planet—natural creatures and what I call conceptual beings. The latter are invariably monsters; and they typify, each in its own kind, a concept of emotion. On the northern continent, I met the Sea People, like giant spiders but with souls of intense spiritual devotion. Then there were the Eeima, tiny humans who flutter in the sun on butterfly wings, and they represent the concept of carnal love. And now come the slul—the concept of rage and hate . . . but they descend, as well as do the others, from the race of the Mighty of old; a race that is beginning again in the modern mutants whom these conceptual beings call Children of the Mighty."

"And you . . . ?" said Valdez.

"They call me Child of the Mighty," Jarvis said simply.

He turned his attention again to the milky sky and saw upon it fluttering shapes winging between the stars and again sent forth his call, that Song of Power, which to these conceptuals was a promise of the re-establishment of the Mighty.

Into his being sliced a saw-edged thought, promulgated in the horde, piercing to his brain like an instrument of trepan.

"Jeff Jarvis! Welcome! We have heard of your coming. We have awaited you. Because of you, the Mighty will one day walk again upon the fields and hills of Eloraspon and our wait-

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ing will be over. We weary, Jeff Jarvis, of rage and hate. We weary of cruelty and destruction. We would live in peace with men . . . which we cannot do without you."

"Shall the Mighty indeed walk again upon Eloraspon?" Jarvis cried from the depths of his soul. "The Tharn have placed me and my friends upon this tower to die in the foray of the slul. But none must die, else Eloraspon die also, and the seed of the Mighty be forever extinguished. We need your help, O slul!"

"We call ourselves the Eltaroa," boomed back the thundering thought, "and the Mighty *shall* live again. They shall again walk the face of Eloraspon! Then indeed will Time be golden and there shall be forever peace upon the face of this world." The mighty chorus rolled into a paean of promise. "Let the Mighty live, Jeff Jarvis! We shall help you!"

Great, winged bodies hovered in the city glow and the wind of their wings was like a gale that swept the tower. Things hideous to behold dropped from the heights, gripped the parapet with scaled claws, enormous, toothed heads writhing on sinuous necks as they folded their leathery wings.

Thork stood his ground bravely, but with an appealing look toward Jarvis. Valdez clenched and unclenched his fists nervously.

EVEN Jarvis shrank within himself at the exhalation of doom from these embodiments of that evil that has been Man's curse throughout all space and all time.

He said in his inmost being, "Eltaroa, friends! The spaces of air are to you as are the walking places to men! Carry my friends upon your backs to the safety of the hills visible there in the light of the moons. There set them down and harm them not."

"Your wish is law, Son of the Mighty. But what about yourself?"

"I would descend to the street at the foot of this building. The Tharn hold captive a Child of the Mighty—a daughter of Gipar—and another maid who is the daughter of my Tharn companion. I must save them before the Dingir return for the princess to carry her away to Surandanish!"

The winged dragons stirred and hissed. The air above clattered with fluttering shapes. The song of hate rose to a grossly pitched high.

"The Bronze Ones made us as we are," rolled the collective thought. "The Bronze Ones destroyed the Mighty! They are our enemy and we are theirs."

Jarvis explained his plan to his companions.

Thork said, "Let me at least accompany you, Jeff Jarvis. We

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shall arm ourselves from the Lugal's armory and you may need an extra blade."

"I shall do this best alone," Jarvis returned shortly. "Go now and do as I say. The Eltaroa will bear you to safety."

Moments later, Jarvis stood alone upon the tower, watching his friends wing off into the night. Then he clambered aboard his own mount and encircled the cold, scaly neck with his arms. The Eltaroa lurched and sickening vertigo attacked him as they dropped away from the parapet. Then the breath caught in his throat and his body pressed heavily against the mailed back of the slul and the great wings slammed the air. The slul banked in a wheeling turn, then dropped like an elevator. The wind of their fall ripped at Jarvis to dislodge him, then the wings came down powerfully again and Jarvis felt the intolerable weight of deceleration. Talons ripped the hard-packed surface of the street, and Jarvis slid off to the solider stability of his own legs.

He discovered Rani of Tukulta by accident, after recovering his weapons once more from the Lugal's armory and pursuing a course through occasionally deserted apartments of the Lugal's harem. Often he escaped detection by a hair, for the entire level thronged with twittering women moving about at random. Now he was at last trapped, for the rooms on all sides were occupied. Worse, a group of chattering females even now approached this very room! As the door swung open he stepped through the wall into a room hung on all sides from floor to ceiling with a tapestried arras. Luckily, there was space between the arras and the wall, but barely enough for him to stand upright, pressed against the wall at his back. The coarse weave of the arras rasped against his face and he almost feared to breathe lest he be discovered.

His probing Mag senses warned him that two women were in the room, then elation surged through him. One was Rani! She could help him find Ilil! He could even sense what Rani was doing —braiding the hair of the other woman, who was obviously one of the Lugal's many wives. How could he attract Rani's attention without alarming the other! A single scream would prove his undoing.

HE carefully worked his knife over his shoulder and began to cut a slit in the arras. Slowly . . . slowly . . . the material was worked with threads of pure gold and hard to cut. He finally brought an eye to the slit and surveyed the chamber, a boudoir, in which the slave girl worked at her mistress's hair.

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The Tharn woman was lovely. It was difficult for Jarvis to reconcile her strictly human beauty with the ugliness of the Tharn, but he remembered that Thork had told him only the males were addicts of the drug. She was looking in a silver mirror and this reflected to him the creamy beauty of her bosom and her face cast in the mold of a professional charmer with high, arched brows, shadowed eyes and scarlet painted lips.

"What think you, Rani," she said in studied, elegant tones. "Will my lord the Lugal choose my arms for his comfort tonight?"

"A fool were he to choose otherwise," replied the girl diplomatically.

In the mirror, Jarvis saw the woman's lips curl with a look of scorn.

"Fool, indeed!" she snarled. "That Giparian wench has enchanted him!"

"What a shame," murmured Rani, "that he neglects his harem for every pretty face that is brought before him!"

Jarvis smiled at Rani's deliberate attempt to create trouble for the Lugal. But the time was ripe for action. He dared not hesitate too long. Quickly he slit the arras deeply enough to admit him into the chamber. As he stepped through, Rani turned and looked him full in the face. Her eyes flashed an instantaneous look of recognition, then she whirled upon her mistress and began to strangle her with her own braids.

"This one will not cry out!" she spoke tersely over her shoulder.

At once, Jarvis gagged the Tharn woman with a strip torn from her own garment and Rani released the braid. They bound the struggling woman with scarves and laid her on her own bed.

Jarvis smiled into her blazing eyes. "Lie quietly and no harm will come to you." He turned to Rani. "Quickly, now! Where is Ilil?"

"I will lead you to her!"

"Good! Which way?" She pointed and, before the horrified gaze of the Tharn woman, they strode together through the solid wall.

They could not take the most direct route, but went by deserted chambers and corridors in a round-about way that lost much time. But at last they stepped into a magnificent apartment in which Ilil sat alone. At sight of Jarvis, her lovely eyes widened, her cheeks blanched and she swayed as if to fall. Jarvis sprang forward and caught her in his arms, pressing his mouth to hers in a passionate avowal of love.

"My love, my love!" she mur-

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mured. "I had lost all hope!"

"So might I, were it not for my love for you," he returned and kissed her again. Then he held her at arm's length. "But come—we shall not be safe here for long . . ."

Even as he spoke, there was a clatter of accoutrements outside the door as the guards sprang to attention. A shout echoed in the corridor: "Open up! Make way for the exalted Lugal, Zag-ab-Shab of Kullab!"

A key grated in the massive lock at the same instant that Jarvis and his companions stepped through the wall into the neighboring apartment.

CHAPTER IX

WITHIN the hour, the trio were riding out of Drahubba on dil from the stable of the royal guard and both Ilil and Rani were girded with weapons destined for the hands of Thork and Valdez. The slul, still fluttering overhead in the light of the twin moons, were a blessing, for the streets were deserted and they had clear passage into the hills outside the city.

At the groundlevel, the lay of the land took on a different aspect than it had presented from the top of the tower. Jarvis was not sure upon which jutting foothill he had instructed the slul to deposit his companions. They rode up rocky slopes and down twisting canyons while Jarvis' Mag senses probed far, but he found no sign of them. The sky in the east paled; Nanna and Munus dipped above mountain peaks. By sun-up, Jarvis realized, companies of Thorn warriors on swift dil would be scouring the hills for them.

"I remember this canyon," Rani said, looking about in the gathering daylight. "The Tharn brought me through here on the way to Drahubba. There is a cave . . ."

"If you can remember where you saw it," Jarvis said, "we can hide there through the day. But we'd better find it fast!"

"I think . . . it was high up on the hill," Rani faltered. "I remembered the Tharn seemed frightened when we went by it. That seemed peculiar to me, because they have a reputation for fearing nothing. They called it the lair of the . . . the elyisha!"

"I heard that word only tonight," Ilil put in. "One of the Lugal's women made a remark—'the only good thing about the Night of the Slul is that even the horrid elyisha dares not leave its hole in the ground!'"

Jarvis grunted. If there was superstition connected with the cave, so much the better. He hoped fervently Rani's memory was not at fault. The dil, urged on by rein and the spurs built into the stirrups, leaped and

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skipped up the rocky slope, splashing through the shallows of the tumbling stream in the canyon, sometimes detouring around falls and rapids. As the sun rose, mantling snowy peaks with a first flush of pink, they found the cave they sought. Nor was it too soon. Already Jarvis heard behind them the noise of pursuit and sensed many Tharn astride laboring dil.

Whatever the elyisha, reputed to dwell in the cave, might be, it could be no more of a menace than the bloodthirsty Tharn tracking them. Jarvis rode at full speed directly into the cave mouth, sword and hand, followed by the women.

Leaving their mounts, Jarvis urged his companions back from the cave mouth, into the dark, snaky corridor that dipped down into the bowels of the planet. Behind a heap of boulders, he threw himself flat and pulled the women down beside him.

"If the Tharn come in," he said, "we can either retreat farther into the cave or stand and fight. But if, as Rani says, they fear this place, they may not even try to enter."

Outside the cave there was a burst of noise—shouting Tharn, thundering dil, and clattering equipment. Jarvis heard the Lugal Zag-ab-Shab roaring at his warriors to enter the cave and cursing them as they held back.

A new voice rang out and Jarvis recognized in its tone the authority of the Dingir. He wondered how the Lugal had reacted when the Dingir had returned. Right now, they seemed to be in command, but no more successful at urging the warriors into the cave.

Jarvis had tried to probe the tortuous gut writhing into the mountain, but the perception he had had of what lay far below made him sick with dread. What kind of horror could the elyisha be that even the dreadful Tharn feared to face it?

Jarvis turned to exploring the walls of their prison with his Mag senses. Darkness shrouded their surroundings, but his perception saw plainer than sight. He leaped upon the rocks behind them and climbed toward the ceiling. There *was* an opening in the rock! From the narrow fissure fanned a cool breeze—it must open on daylight above!

"Come quickly!" he whispered to his companions. "Here is a way out!"

HE let them enter ahead of him, then squeezed himself between the tight-drawn lips of rock just as the light entering the cave mouth dimmed as it was blocked by the bodies of half a dozen giant Bronze Men surrounding the Lugal Zag-ab-Shab himself. They advanced with cau-

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tious steps and drawn swords.

The fugitives huddled in the fissure, not daring to breathe. Below them, the Dingir party halted.

"If they have gone farther than this," protested the Lugal, "they will never come out alive. That is what you want, isn't it?"

"It is not for you to decide what we want or do not want," retorted one of the Bronze Men. "You angered us when you flouted our authority last night. The next time will be your last. And if you had succeeded as you planned with the princess of Gipar, we would have killed you when we returned!"

"They must have gone farther in," said another Bronze Man. They gathered in a huddle just under the fissure and traded comments in a language strange to Jarvis' ears. The Lugal stood nervously aside by himself, straining his huge, saucerish eyes to peer into the blackness of the cave.

"Let us return," he grumbled. "We can make camp in the canyon until nightfall. When the elyisha stirs with the fall of night, they will have to come out —if they are still alive!"

The party retreated, leading the fugitives' dil out into the open.

"What shall we do now?" Ilil whispered, stirring cramped limbs.

"Between what lies below and what awaits outside," Jarvis replied, "there is no place else to go but up. Let me by and I will lead."

It was an ordeal to squeeze by the two women in the cramped space of the fissure. Jarvis began to climb, probing for handholds in the dark with his Mag senses, offering advice to the two below in low tones. Slowly they toiled upward. Sometimes the fissure so narrowed that it was all Jarvis could do to squeeze through. Then it would widen again and they mounted ever upward.

There was no sense of time in this subterrene blackness. How long or how far they climbed, Jarvis could not guess. After a while, he could pass on no more climbing directions. The only sound was the scraping of their feet, or the occasional ring of axe or sword upon the stone wall. They stopped many times to rest, bodies braced across the chimney. Jarvis' hands were raw, his knees and back bruised. The women must be suffering agonies from the climb, but neither voiced a word of complaint.

When he was about to despair of ever finding an end to this tortuous worm-hole, he fancied he saw the blackness of the pit turning gray above. He redoubled his effort. A moment later he crawled out upon the sandy floor of a small cavern and turned to

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help his companions to safety.

A quick glance around revealed the hopelessness of their position. The cavern was wholly enclosed with no entrance save the one through which they had come and another—a small hole in the ceiling through which streamed daylight—fifteen feet above their heads!

He sat down upon the sandy floor to rest his aching muscles. He had had no food since yesterday morning and his body felt the lack.

"We can always go back down," he said without enthusiasm. "By tomorrow they will consider we have fallen foul of the elyisha and will go away."

THE thought of retracing that perilous path downward in the dark was no source of encouragement to any. Ilil and Rani lay collapsed wordless beside him, blowing the hair back from their heated faces in the way women have, whatever their world of origin. And thus they rested. Jarvis did not attempt to tell the passing hours, noting only that the light in the roof-opening was at last slowly dimming.

Then suddenly a brittle sound reached his ears from above. A clumsy foot had kicked a rock. He leaped to his feet and his Mag senses probed . . .

"Thork!" he called. "Valdez! Here we are!"

An ugly, tusked blue face looked down on them through the hole in the ceiling, joined a moment later by the face of Valdez.

"It's dark in there!" Valdez said. "We can't see you."

"Stand away from the hole," Jarvis said. "I will throw my axe up and you can pull us out with the cord!"

Minutes later, the cave-bound trio stood once again in the light of day, gripping their rescuers and rejoicing with exclamations of delight. By nightfall they were miles from the cave of the elyisha and on their way through the mountains to Gipar.

"Lucky I stumbled on that hole in the ground years ago," Thork had told them. "When we saw you riding into the cave with the Tharn after you, I knew you would find the chimney in the rock. We would have got to you sooner, except we had to go a long way around to avoid the Tharn."

They forged almost due east for weeks. They picked a road among mountainous crags, traversed breath-taking gorges slashed in the native rock, paralleled torrents thundering in the defiles, climbed precipitous cliffs, and rounded the shoulders of mountains on narrow ledges. They lived off the country, depending on Jarvis' boomerang, axe or knife to fell their game.

Valdez and Rani spent their time together, and Jarvis knew

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that it was only a pretext—but a splendid one—when the Peruvian asserted he made much of the girl's company only to learn the language of Eloraspon. And Jarvis frequented Ilil's presence most of the time, which left Thork pretty much to himself, grim and taciturn but stumping along, doing more than his share in dressing game, preparing meals, and helping his companions over rough spots in the road.

Thork was big. Thork was strong. His looks and his aloneness put him just a little outside the social circle. Only Jarvis sensed the bitterness eating at the heart of the blue giant. He walked sometimes by the side of his own daughter, to whom he could not speak a fatherly word. He approached the borders of his own country, which he dared not enter. He was Tharn, and at no time in his decade of exile had he felt it more keenly than now.

They were a travel-stained lot that bore down at long last upon an outpost of the Giparian border guard. They were weary, garbed in the shaggy pelts of game animals, for their clothing had long since worn and torn to shreds. The hair and beards of the Earthmen were long and tangled.

They viewed the dome-topped stone hut of the outpost from the crest of a ridge, saw the banner flying above it, and broke into a run. He knew the reason for such construction now—the slul. After a few running steps, Jarvis slowed, looked around. Where was Thork? He called.

Valdez laid a hand on his arm. "I have learned enough Eloraspo-nese to understand his story as he told it to me, Jeff. Don't make the parting hard for him."

Jarvis shook free of the Peruvian's grip and hastened back the way they had come, calling out Thork's name. The blue giant had halted in the shadow of a copse.

HE shook his head as Jarvis came up to him. "I had wished to avoid farewells, Jeff Jarvis. It breaks my heart to turn back, but I must. Once a Tharn, always a Tharn."

"There are men of my world," Jarvis said, "who since time began have felt as you feel now . . . outcast because of a difference in looks, in the color of their skin, even because of the God they worship. It is men who count, Thork, not skins, not races, not beliefs nor dissimilarities. We *want* you with us."

"I could not go into Tukulta," Thork protested miserably, "and face the Lady Kriah. She was my *wife*, Jarvis! I could not face her like this, for I know she would see through this face and hide as if it were a diguise and recognize me within it. We loved each other."

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Jarvis laid a friendly hand on the Tharn's great forearm.

"There is still Surandanish, Thork. Rani has promised me mounts and supplies for the journey. And I must see Ilil to the safety of her father's palace in Gipar. Then I must go on. There will be fighting and adventure, and at the end, that final goal I have promised myself I shall achieve. Whatever I may have made this journey for, whatever must be done, I shall do it. There is none I should rather have at my side than Thork the Tharn, fallen ishak of Tukulta!"

The giant's ugly blue feathers lighted with pleasure.

"You speak as a sincere man, Jeff Jarvis. I have not given the world a chance to reject me, but have alienated myself with my own thoughts. But the way to Surandanish does not lie across Gipar, but through the Kurgal. You shall have to return this way from Gipar and I will wait here, at the outpost. That way I shall be spared much pain and shall not revoke the ancient boast that no Tharn has ever set foot in a sacred city of Gipar!"

Side by side, man and Tharn, they walked back down the slope. Their companions had halted at the outpost and chatted already with its three-warrior deputation. The day was sunny and warm, the air clear and fragrant with the smell of pines. The hills about them shimmered with an atmosphere of peace, so lulling that Jarvis was taken entirely by surprise at the next event.

A shout from one of the Giparian warriors rang up the slope.

"Dingir!"

Jarvis' brain filled with a harsh jangle of alarm and he whirled, his blade flashing in his hand. From what quarter came the Dingir?

An abrupt, whistling scream burst upon his eardrums and his eyes followed his Mag senses. An ovoid object with a pulsing, many-hued membranous halo swooped down from low above the tree tops. Jarvis' perceptions told him at once it was some kind of a flying mechanism. From the base of its oviform fuselage trailed a score of what seemed to be metallic ropes, whipping in the wind of its passage. The thing swished over his head and swooped the hundred yards to hover above the group, frozen into immobility, at the outpost. Like live things, the trailing ropes wrapped themselves around Ilil, then snatched her up and away from the circle of her friends! The flying object lifted and whistled away, slowly drawing its burden upward and through an opening in the bottom of the fuselage.

Horror, rage, consternation, fear—all these gripped Jarvis as

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he stood helplessly by and watched it happen. Again there came that awful, whistling scream and at the same moment Jarvis felt the wind go out of him as Thork struck him heavily with his massive forearm. He tumbled over and over down the slope and the second flying machine, foiled in its attempt, rose up with dangling tentacles and disappeared after its companion in the far reaches of the blue.

Jarvis staggered to his feet, too dazed to thank his companion for the swiftness of thought that had saved him from the clutches of the Dingir. He could only stare stupidly, cursing himself and remembering belatedly that Ilil had once told him that the Dingir came by mysterious means, sometimes flying through the air.

And now she was gone—fallen into the hands of her hated enemy. She had been kidnapped by the Bronze Men of Surandanish!

CHAPTER X

"THAT night in Drahubba," Jarvis told Thork upon his return, "the Eltaroa promised me aid to scale the Great Cliffs that mark the border between the Kurgal and the Dingir-ki, the land of the Dingir. The Dingir leave that border unguarded, feeling that the slul are guard enough."

"Valdez did not return with you," the Tharn noted.

"As soon as the Lugal of Gipar learned the fate of his daughter Ilil, he began to organize a military expedition to attempt to penetrate the Dingir defenses to eastward. Valdez elected to remain and travel with them. If all goes well, they should get to Surandanish about the same time we do."

Thork nodded. "We travel a longer route, but the eastern mountains are more terrible than any on this side. They will have to fight Dingir most of the way."

"Are you sure they will?" Jarvis asked.

"No man has ever before fought the Dingir," Thork returned, "but there is a first time for everything. The Bronze Men have never taken a princess of Gipar before, either."

"I helped Rani decide not to tell her mother the lie you told her in Drahubba," Jarvis said. "I did not tell her you are her father, only that you could have been mistaken in your identification."

Thork shrugged, but whether from relief or irritation, Jarvis did not know. The Tharn busied himself with the pack dil Jarvis had brought along to carry weapons and supplies, then swung into the saddle of the extra mount.

"Talk will not carry us a single pace toward the Kurgal," he grunted.

Beyond Kullab lay the land of

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Imdar, whose far border was the separation between it and the mountainous plateau called the Kurgal. The first leg of their journey lay southward, through a pass high up among the snowfields of the towering range be-

They had ridden no more than a few miles into this bleak region when the attack came. Not even the brief warning Jarvis had through his Mag senses of the ambush was of help, for the road led through boulder-strewn coun-

hind Drahubba. It was a barren, rocky place, Thork told Jarvis, inhabited by the fierce mountain Tharn who hunted the thral for its purple pelt.

try behind each of which lurked one or more of the savage Tharn.

They burst upon them like a living avalanche, shrieking

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their primitive war cries. Jarvis' blade leaped into his hand and hewed at the howling mob. He kicked one Tharn in the face, clove the skull of another, then whirled his mount, decapitating a third. Thork wrought equal havoc on his own account, but the throng was like the ant-horde of the Hashurgal. They attacked with mindless ferocity, two more taking the place of each that was cut down. In minutes, both Jarvis and Thork were dragged from their saddles and spread-eagled upon the ground, held down each by a half-score of evil-smelling Tharn.

"Kill us!" growled Thork. "We are warriors and death becomes those who have lost a fight!"

The leader of the mountain Tharn kicked Thork in the head for an answer, then stooped and robbed his leather trappings of the tharn drug. He was a gigantic specimen of Tharnhood, uglier than any Jarvis had ever seen, even the Lugal. His long, yellow tusks arched downward nearly to his collarbone. He grated an order and the prisoners' wrists and ankles were tied with leather thongs to stakes stone-driven into the ground.

"I am Thrak," he said, glowering upon them. "You are my prisoners. Stay here!" With that curious command, he stalked off, followed by his raggle-taggle crew.

"By all rights, they should have killed us," Thork mumbled. Blood encrimsoned one of his tusks where Thrack had kicked him.

"There is a reason for that," Jarvis replied. "I have been sensing around—the Lugal Zag-ab-Shab is here with many warriors. There are caves among the rocks above us and I feel the presence of women and children."

"The Lugal knew we should come this way to reach the Dingir-ki through the Kurgal," Thork said. "He laid a trap for us."

"But how could he have known that we escaped the cave of the elyisha?"

"We were seen on our way to Gipar. I saw the sign of many of the hill people, even though they stayed out of our sight. Word would have passed to roving Tharn and from them to the Lugal."

JARVIS stared at the sky in which tiny specks, glinting with color, soared and fluttered. They were his friends, the Eeima, but their tiny fingers could do nothing with the tough rawhide that bound them. Out on the bouldered plain he sensed their dil, which had scattered in flight after the battle. They were ripping succulent roots from crannies and crevices in the rocky soil with their toothed bills.

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"I would think the mountain Tharn had captured our dil also for their value," he remarked to Thork.

"They captured us for the Lugal," Thork pointed out. "After he has taken us away, they will round up the dil—but for themselves, not the Lugal."

"They took our weapons," Jarvis said, "but there are more on the pack animal, if we could but get our hands on them . . ."

"We shall have to free them from these stakes first," Thork retorted sourly.

By themselves, the dil were docile, gentle beasts; being ridden or driven made them nervous, often savage. Might he not try to control one with his mind? The minute brain of the dil was sluggish now with the enjoyment of food. Jarvis tried, hurling forth his Mag will with all the strength he had.

The sun seemed to grow hotter as he concentrated. Sweat trickled under the Giparian trappings of leather he had donned in Tukulta. He did not try to command all the dil—just one, his own mount.

The beast continued to chomp roots, pausing often to stare dreamily toward the horizon. Jarvis could not see the creature except in his mind, but he sensed that it was drifting away from its companions. He doubled his effort. Slowly the great creature moved toward them. The ground nearby tremored under its tread and Jarvis dared open his eyes. The dil towered over him, peering down curiously as if to ask him what it was he wanted.

Jarvis concentrated on the thought of pulling the stake from the ground until sweat pooled under his body. Slowly the dil's great, toothed head came down. It paused, scratching the ground with a thunderous tearing of gravel. Suddenly the trap-like bill snapped at the stake to which Jarvis' wrist was bound and jerked it from the ground. With it went Jarvis' hand, seeming to pull his arm from its socket.

In a moment, the dil jerked the other stake free of the soil and Jarvis sat up, raking thongs from wrists and ankles. He quickly loosed Thork and they rode off double on the dil. When they had rounded up the other animals, the Tharn extracted a sword from the pack of the baggage mount and mounted his own dil with a look of set determination on his bloody features.

"Where are you going?" called the Earthman.

The giant Tharn pointed ahead along the path with his sword. "You go that way, Jeff Jarvis, and take the pack animal with you. I will rejoin you later when I have got back my tharn!"

Jarvis had forgotten Thrak's act of robbery, but it came home

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to him now that Thork must have his tharn or die. He ached to ride with his blue-skinned friend, but the soul-song of Surandanish was strong within his being. Ilil was there, helpless, awaiting his aid. His jaw set grimly and he rode on without a backward glance, tugging the pack dil along by its tether.

THE maritime country of Imdar stretched from the mountains behind Drahubba to the shore of the southern sea, lying in temperate latitudes. It was a prosperous country with orchards, fields of ripening grain and everywhere the round-domed farmhouses of stone. There were only two of the ancient cities of the Mighty in all of Imdar, Thork had told him, and he rode by one of these and camped beyond it where he could see the glow of it in the night. It was deserted. The natives of Imdar dwelt in cities they had built themselves, in accordance with the world-wide prohibition instituted long ago by the Dingir.

It was a pleasant, smiling country, reminding Jarvis in its climate and aspect of the northwestern region of the United States. The natives were friendly and kind, believing him a warrior of Gipar, as his trappings and weapons seemed to attest.

He grieved for miles over the fate of his Tharn friend, but grief could not replace Thork, and the emotional burden of Ilil's predicament lay even heavier on his soul. When he came to the thousand-foot high forest fringing the sea, the way turned eastward and the land rose toward the mountains. He had passed through many populous towns in well over a thousand miles of travel, but now the inhabited places had begun to thin out. They became mere villages in the canyons between the shoulders of mountains, finally outposts around which rose snowy peaks that marked the backbone of Dimgal. He paused at last at a wild, brawly settlement on the very border of Imdar whose inhabitants thrived on the trade of travelers passing to and from the Kurgal.

In the stone-domed "general store" and inn, Jarvis applied for quarters.

"Heading for the Kurgal?" asked the storekeeper shrewdly.

"I ride on in the morning," Jarvis returned shortly.

"You're not planning to ride the dil up there?"

"Why not?"

The innkeeper threw up his hands. "The slul, Giparian, the slul!"

Jarvis had not forgotten the slul, but he had forgotten the terror they inspired. They had been no menace to him on his journey. He just looked questioning.

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"You will need a slul-wagon," said the Imdarian. "It is not like down here, where you need shelter only a few nights before and after the full moon. The slul fly by day and by night in the Kurgal. They'd pick you off that dil like a ripe snazl-berry, and make short work of the animal, too!"

"What should I do?" Jarvis asked.

The Imdarian sized him up with a covetous expression. "You have money, of course? And your animals are worth something. My cousin operates a used slul-wagon lot—I can fix you up with something good. Wagon—team—the works. Come with me . . ."

The slul-wagon was something like the old covered wagon of the early American West, except that the rounded cover was a half-inch thickness of toughest steel. This was for protection, the Imdarian said, against the diving attacks of the slul. There were slits in the steel through which the defenders could shoot arrows or thrust swords. The wide wheel-base of the wagon made it difficult, if not impossible, to tip over. It was, literally, a tank and the only permissible means of travel on the plains of the Kurgal.

The wagon was drawn by a team of two or more issup, depending on wagon size and load. The issup were armor-plated, saurian type creatures resembling small stegosaurs from Earth's Jurassic age. So thick and hard was the bony covering of the issup that not even the glittering fangs or scimitar-like talons of the slul could scratch it. They were a natural product of the Kurgal plateau region. Nature had endowed them plentifully with protection.

As Jarvis concluded the deal for a small wagon and team of issup with the fat, greasy looking cousin of the innkeeper, the latter stood to one side, thoughtfully pulling at his chin.

"Would your name," he said at last, "be Jejavis, or something like that?"

Jarvis turned on him, the light of suspicion flaring in his eyes.

"From whom did you hear that name?"

The Imdarian backed up a step. "Just a minute! There was a Tharn-creature asking about you. Said he was your life-slave." He laughed nervously. "What Giparian ever had a *Tharn* for a life-slave?"

"This one!" Jarvis barked succinctly. "Where is the Tharn now?"

The Imdarian shrugged uncomfortably. "We ran him out," he mumbled, then added defensively. "We thought he was lying! And we could not risk having one of those blue devils in our town! We have women and children . . ."

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The Earthman cut him with a glance. "Never mind the room at the inn," he said bitterly. "I must find that Tharn!"

"Maybe on the road to the Kurgal," suggested the crestfallen innkeeper. "He left in that direction. He said he would be waiting for you."

A mile beyond the outpost, Jarvis drew up his team at a shout from the wooded slope. A great, blue shape came bounding down, scattering rocks and debris in his travel. Thork was grinning and breathing hard as he clambered up on the seat beside Jarvis.

Jarvis grinned too, a contented feeling warming his heart. He had regained his friend. He snapped the reins at the issup and the beasts resumed their slow, torpid crawl.

CHAPTER XI

I ASSUME," said Jarvis, "you got back your tharn."

The giant patted his waistband. "And the mountain Tharn have a new chief."

Thrak's epitaph. Jarvis said, "How did you get here ahead of me?"

"I had to wait a long time for an opportunity to find Thrak alone. And then you were so far ahead I dared not follow you into Imdar, where I would have been attacked. I rode the dil as far among the mountains as it could go, then unsaddled it and turned it loose. I continued on foot. The way is shorter but . . ."

He needed to say no more. The issup crawled on. They were slow but they had advantages other than their armor plate. They could travel for days and nights without stopping for rest, food or drink. And they needed no hand on the reins except to start and stop. Once pointed in the direction of their destination, they crawled forward in a straight line until they reached it. If forced aside by an obstruction, they went around it or over it, and returned as soon as possible to the line of travel, as if both map and compass were built into their tiny heads. Between stopping and moving they did nothing at all and stayed moveless as the wagon.

Now started on their way to the Kurgalian city of Aldaral, they could be forgotten. Jarvis and Thork did nothing but talk, eat, and sleep in the rumbling bed of the wagon. When the heat under their steel canopy grew unbearable, they got out and walked alongside the wagon, or ran ahead and sat down, waiting for the wagon to catch up at its creaking snail's pace. Soon slul appeared, soaring overhead, even more hideous in the daylight than they had appeared by night. But Jarvis made himself known to them and the journey continued without incident.

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The Kurgal itself was a flat, sandy plain stretching out in every direction as far as the eye could see, level, treeless, a featureless expanse across which whipped a thin, chill wind that keened around their wagon like the spirts of those ancient dead once reputed to haunt this place. Every night, they huddled in furs to ward off the cold.

The twisting burrows of the troglodyte cities of the Kurgal extended for miles underground from the central pyramid of stone which marked the entrance on the surface. Ages old, the pyramids were chosen for roosting places by the slul and each was now a rounded heap of slul-dung. As they came up to the pyramid of Aldaran, the winged horrors, at Jarvis' suggestion, swooped and dived savagely around them in mock attack. It would look better so, Jarvis thought, particularly if spies of the Bronze Men should be watching.

The Lulu of the Kurgal were runty, half-wild creatures, but they were friendly, and Jarvis was able to procure more provisions and directions to the next nearest city of the Kurgal. He did not plan to go there, but he felt that some falsification of their destination was necessary for the protection of their mission.

Once the pyramid of Aldaran and its roosting horde of slul had dropped below the horizon, Jarvis altered their course to nearly due north, from which direction now came the Song of Surandanish. It was now, when he let it, a throbbing, numbing beat within his consciousness, indicative of its nearness.

Accompanying them skimmed and fluttered thousands of slul and Jarvis communed with them. Once they had sighted the gleaming cliffs that still lay far ahead, said the slul, they must turn again eastward to find the most suitable place for entry into the Dingir-ki.

THAT point, they found out days later, was the lowest in all the hundreds of miles of the great barrier which was so high that not even the slul could fly over it. Even at this place they could not reach the lip of the massive precipice, but about half way up was the entrance to a cave which they could reach, a dark opening about which fluttered a multitude of scintillant specks, doorway to the Mothering Pits of the Eeima!

Jarvis cut the traces of the issup, turned their heads in the direction of Aldaral, and ordered them to move. They trudged off side by side, nor would they stop until the Aldaralians, perceiving them in their travel alone, rode out to intercept them. They would provide tacit evidence that he and Thork had perished in the

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desert, victims of the slul. It would not take long for news to spread along the trade routes of Dimgal that this oddly-assorted pair had come to an evil-end on the flat-topped roof of Eloraspon. Eventually, the word was sure to reach the god-like ears of the Bronze Men.

Bundling what weapons and food supplies they could take with them, Jarvis informed the Eltaroa of their readiness. Two of the monsters swooped to a taloned landing. The take-off jarred the breath from Jarvis' lungs. Leathery wings beat swiftly and the wind whistled, tearing at his grip with fingers of ice. The desert dropped away in spinning circles; the awesome face of the cliff slipped downward. The slul glided in for a landing at the cave mouth.

"We have done what we can, Jeff Jarvis," communed the horse of Eltaroa. "The Eeima will direct you from here. Do what you must in Surandanish, and free us of our yoke of time!"

Then the slul dropped away from the ledge, volplaning in a long, swooping glide that got them speed for a rapid, circling climb. And back to Jarvis came the horrid soul-song of the Eltaroa, a thrumming diapason of psychic music in chanting rhythm, a sad farewell to something beyond the knowledge of either.

The Eeima swirled around Jarvis and Thork in an ecstatic kaleidoscope of color. To Thork they were silent, save for the flutter of their wings, but Jarvis inwardly perceived their multitude of piping voices borne on the glittering, heart-wrenching melody of their soul-song.

"Welcome, Jeff Jarvis! To the Great Mother shall we take him? Let us take him to the Great Mother—to Eluola, Layer of Eggs, Queen of the Eeima!"

Jarvis bade Thork wait for him on the ledge and went with the fluttering creatures through rock passages lighted by a greenish, pallid glow from fungus growing on floor and walls. In a subterranean chamber, rock-ceiled higher than a cathedral, he walked carefully to avoid stepping on the grub-like things that crawled everywhere, munching on the fungus. The Mothering Pits where the race of the Eeima was born! Streams of Eeima flitted through the chamber on gauzy butterfly wings, emerging from and entering numerous tunnels that opened off the main concourse. At one such opening, they bade Jarvis stay. Here a double stream fluttered busily, the ones going in empty-handed, each coming out bearing in its hands a tiny egg bound for the incubators.

Then a singing sensation like purling water caressed his mind.

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"Welcome, Jeff Jarvis! Eluola bids you welcome to the Mothering Pits. Enter!"

Even had she not identified herself, Jarvis would have recognized that sweet, elfin tone. Lovely Eluola! He remembered her from his first excursion upon this planet, when he had succumbed to her spell of passion and had fallen in love with her and could have killed himself that she stood but a foot in height. But there had been a madness about him then. He was clear-headed now. He entered the chamber and came to a stop, heaviness descending upon his spirit and a sadness flooding his soul at sight of what the beauty he still treasured in his mind had become. Eluola's answering thought was reproachful.

"Am I so changed, Jeff Jarvis, that your soul recoils at sight of me?"

He made some embarrassed protest and forced himself to look into her face—so sweet once, so lovely. Now it was bloated, her body distended with the weight of eggs aching to be laid. Gone were the beautiful wings of azure and gold; this . . . this thing . . . was but a mockery of the beauty he had loved.

But there was no less sweetness in the tone of her thought. "There are other beauties than in the person, Jeff Jarvis. I see beauty in your Sonship to the Mighty, beauty in the children of the Eeima out there in the Pits. There is beauty here underground, in the light of the weed that glows, as well as under the sun. In your heart you grieve—is it for me? I think not, for I am happy. It is for yourself—for what you once were, or thought you were. You are different now, Jeff Jarvis. I feel it in you. You have a hardness and a purpose about you that was never really there before. You have sacrificed something as well as I have. Mine has gone into my race——where has yours gone? Can you name the place, Jeff Jarvis?"

His soul stammered inwardly in speechless protest but she continued.

"You need not tell me. I know. I should have known it would be you, but we all thought it was Eamus Brock. I was not even sure of you, even though Brock did fail us, until just now. What you have sacrified is youth and gladness, because you are more now than a Son of the Mighty. You are dedicated!"

JARVIS felt a great longing pour forth from his soul. "But to what am I dedicated, Eluola? Where do I go from here?"

"From here to Surandanish and the salvation of Eloraspon. Generations to come will bless you, Jeff Jarvis, for you are the

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answer to the prayers of the generations that have been!"

"But what must I do?"

"If I could tell you, would it make it easier to accomplish? I think not. Besides, I do not know. There is only the ancient legend, that one day a Son of the Mighty will come and free us who are descended of the Mighty of Old from the bondage of Time! It might have been Eamus Brock but it was not. And so it must be you."

There was such a pathetic eagerness and yearning in Eluola's thought that he could protest no more. What was it he might do that would benefit the Eeima, the Eltaroa, the Sea People of the far northern continent? If he was to be the savior of a world, he was a poor one, for he had no idea of what he must do.

He could not shake off his depressed feeling, even after he and Thork had departed from the Mothering Pits and picked their way down the forested slope in the Dingir-ki. There was an ancient city, Eluola had told him, which they would come to first, and he felt its song in his being and knew from it that the name of the city was Thanranarova, the City Among the Clouds.

A fairyland of spires and towers it was, that wondrous city of old. It sat upon the ridged shoulders of two great mountains. The gorge between was overspun like cobweb with a fine, golden maze of airy walkways stretching from building to building. In the glimmer of the setting sun, that eldritch pile took on a look of unreality, like a dream city, and dreamlike were Jarvis' thoughts as he walked those timeless streets among towering relics of the past, looming against a darkling sky.

The flawless walls of Thanranarove, unmarked by door or window, bespoke the fact that never here had set the foot of man. It was as if Thanranarova remained a shrine, a sacred place, a sanctuary given over to Time for the worship of an ancient dream.

It seemed profane to walk those holy streets, deep with the detritus of ages and lighted by a glow that had come into being before the dinosaurs populated Earth.

Night had fallen on the Kurgal and here at its edge, cold pierced to the bone. A thin wind blew from snowfields argent in the glow of twin moons. Blasphemous as it seemed to him to enter one of these silent crypts, it was necessary, or they would surely freeze.

Thork stood silent with wonder inside the building, and the splendor of it took even Jarvis' breath away. Everything was there—rugs, furnishings, even paintings on the walls—exactly

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as it had been in the ages of the Mighty! Here was a living reminder of what that great race had been like! Jarvis fingered the fine stuff of fabrics and wondered who kept them up. Was it the Bronze Men? What were they to the Mighty that they had maintained this pile in living condition throughout countless milennia? They did not live here themselves. Thanranarova was deserted. Was it in Surandanish alone the Dingir dwellt?

WEARINESS of bones and body precluded exploration. Jarvis relaxed upon a couch but remained nervously awake until he moved to the floor, where he dropped off at once into dreamless sleep.

A thrill of danger from his Mag senses alerted him hours later. Or was it a sound he had heard? He rose to his feet like a panther. Someone had crossed this room while he slept. He was sure of it. Thork was awake, too, looking up questioningly at the Earthman.

"We had a visitor," Jarvis said succinctly.

"Something awakened me," returned the Tharn. "It might have been your getting up."

Jarvis went to the wall of the central shaft and probed through. He returned to Thork's side, whispering.

"A couple of Dingir in the shaft. They must have passed through this very room without spotting us."

"Do you think they know we are here?"

"I think if they did," Jarvis said grimly, "we would not be discussing it now. Come along."

Again he probed through the shaft wall. "They are gone now." He stepped through the wall, followed by Thork. The shaft was engineered the same as those they had seen in Drahubba—an infinity of balconies, circling upward and plunging down. Jarvis raced to the edge of the balcony and peered over, casting his senses beyond his sight. He drew back with a look of surprise.

"They descended the shaft!"

Thork peered cautiously over. "How could they do that?"

"I don't know, but I sensed them down there. The floor of the shaft must be a mile down. They floated to it and walked off!"

He felt that he was on the verge of discovering a tremendous secret. It was obvious now that this central well in every building was a tremendous elevator shaft. The balconies ringing it in profusion were landing stages, one at each floor level. Had the Mighty ascended and descended in elevator cars? The Dingir had used nothing of the sort. Who were the Dingir? Were they, too, descendants of the Mighty—or perhaps they were the Mighty

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themselves? But he knew that was not so, for their minds had responded no more to the probe of his Mag senses than did the minds of ordinary men, which he could not contact at all.

Jarvis said, "I discovered how the Mighty opened their walls with the power of will. Using this shaft must be the same."

Without hesitation, before Thork's horrified gaze, he stepped off the balcony into the emptiness of space. He hung motionless in mid-air, smiling at the Tharn.

"That's it!" he exclaimed. "You will yourself to hover or to go down or up and some force in the shaft takes care of the rest."

He sank out of Thork's sight, then rose again, far above his head, then lightly descended to the landing stage.

"I think it will work with both of us if you so much as hold my hand," he said.

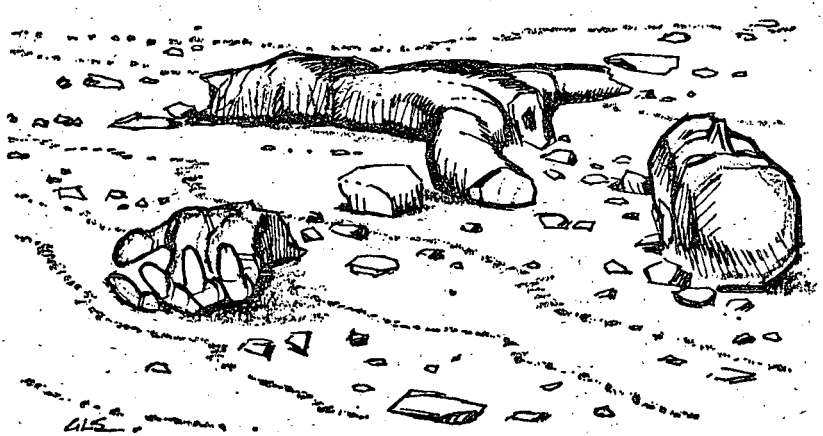
He grasped the Tharn's hand and both of them drifted lightly up from the stage. Thork gasped, then grinned crookedly around his tusks.

"Are you game to go to the bottom?" he asked. "I, for one, should like to see where those Bronze Men went!"

They drifted downward, under perfect control of the Earthman's mind. Jarvis let them down slowly at first while he tested his control, then let their speed of descent increase, but not too swiftly. He did not want to frighten Thork into letting go.

"I have taken some falls in my time," Thork said with a tusked grin, "but never so slowly. I am a feather!"

"A five hundred pound feather if you let go of my hand!"



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Thork sobered and forebore looking down. Jarvis was thinking. The Dingir, he remembered, had used a small, wand-like object to open the wall in Drahubba. They must have some other mechanical means of utilizing the elevator shaft. Perhaps his questions would be answered somewhere far below.

Across his thoughts cut the warning of his Mag senses, like the whir of a rattlesnake, Jarvis stiffened.

"The Dingir are ascending the shaft—and they've spotted us!" He looked around for a balcony to land on, but the wall of the shaft was smooth, polished and glowing. They were far below the bottom-most landing stage and the Dingir were ascending fast. Nor dared he reverse his own direction with speed for fear of losing his grip on Thork.

"We shall have to fight them," Jarvis said grimly. "Swing around with your back to mine and hang on!"

Back to back, each gripping the other with his left hand behind him, the pair plummeted down the shaft. Their swords slithered from their scabbards.

CHAPTER XII

THERE was no way to avoid a conflict. The Dingir arrowed upward, directly toward them. In seconds, they had closed in, circling with drawn blades.

"Let go the Tharn, Jeff Jarvis!" called one of them. "His presence outrages these premises! It is you alone we want!"

The Dingir, unencumbered, and more familiar with the ways of the shaft, could outmaneuver Jarvis with ease. He brought himself and Thork to a hovering halt. He did not deign to reply but held his blade ready, a look of determination on his lean, craggy face. He was using the opportunity to study the Bronze Men and he saw that each maneuvered with one hand on a button-studded box attached to his belt.

"The belt-box is their vulnerable spot, Thork," he muttered over his shoulder. "Strike for it."

The Dingir closed in solemnly, feinting with their blades. Jarvis turned to meet one, presenting Thork to the other. The circumstances of battle were weird and exasperating. The Dingir darted in and out like angry bees and Jarvis was sure that at least a half dozen times his antagonist had stopped just short of running him through. But he had no time to wonder now why his opponent failed to press his advantages. He was too busy slashing for the box at the other's belt.

Quickly Jarvis realized that there was a pattern to the Dingir's blade work that repeated itself over and over, like an exercise being learned by rote. He

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could foresee where the menacing point would be, and he parried with ease—then suddenly slashed at the Dingir's belt. The leather parted and fell away and the Bronze Man plummeted floorward without a sound or glance of reproach.

After that, it was easy to best the other one. In moments, the second Dingir was plunging to join his companion at the bottom of the pit a half mile below.

The brief combat had tired Jarvis and he breathed heavily. The enemy had not been so careful in regard to Thork and the Tharn's blood, trickling over his hand, made it difficult for them to hold together.

"I've been hurt worse eating with a knife," protested the giant at Jarvis' concern. "Just let's get down to the bottom!"

Reaching the floor of the pit, Jarvis went over to one of the smashed enemy, repressing a repugnance for blood. But there was none to be seen. The Dingir lay scattered in pieces, but not a drop of blood had been shed. He called Thork over. The giant ticked a tusk with his thumbnail.

"I've never seen anything like it," he said in response to Jarvis' question. "There is nothing on Eloraspon that does not bleed something, whether it be red or green. These things are like shellfish!"

Jarvis felt a shiver traverse his spine and his brain teemed with all he had heard concerning the Dingir. Who were they? *What* were they? What was their purpose?

"Surely you have guessed the truth by now, Jeff Jarvis!" said a quiet voice behind them.

Jarvis whirled. A Bronze Man stood alone ten paces away, the twin of the one he had slain with his axe in Drahubba. His hand drifted to his sword.

"Please," said the Bronze Man with uplifted hand and a saturnine expression that passed for a smile. "Not again! Yes, I am the one you slew before the eyes of the Lugal of Kullab. When I appeared whole before him again, he lost his ideas of rebellion. He knows now that the Dingir *are* immortal . . . and so do you, Jeff Jarvis!"

"What do you want of me?" asked the Earthman warily.

"This is our land," returned the other. "I should rather ask you why you have come here."

"To free the princess Ilil!"

"That is your secondary purpose. You have proved yourself more human than a Son of the Mighty, Jeff Jarvis. When our efforts to take you failed, we knew the woman would be bait to bring you here. We have waited a long time for you, for we know your purpose in coming here—a purpose we could not afford to let you forget."

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"I came out of respect for Eamus Brock, seeking the records of the ancients in the archives of Surandanish."

"Eamus Brock promised us he would send you," said the Dingir. "The records are tertiary. You have a primary purpose you have not voiced."

"If there is a purpose other than those I have named," Jarvis returned, "I do not know of it."

"Eamus Brock sent you to help us return order to the world of Eloraspon."

HERE it was again, differently phrased, but no less confused in meaning. The Dingir approached slowly.

"We are meant to be friends, Jeff Jarvis. I am Ptal. The Somam, as we call ourselves, call me their leader."

"Friends?" said Jarvis. "After *this?*" He indicated the fragments on the floor.

"They will be gathered up and restored to usefulness," shrugged Ptal. "You still have not guessed, have you? Come—unhand your weapon. You are in no danger here. You wished to consult the records of the Mighty? You shall do so. You wish to see again your princess of Gipar? She is waiting for you, unharmed."

"I wish not only to see her but to take her away and restore her to her father's house!"

"You shall . . . after you have agreed to perform . . . and have performed . . . the task we shall ask of you!"

From openings all around the floor of that mighty shaft, scores of Bronze Men stepped forth. Further resistance was useless. Jarvis looked at Thork and made a gesture with uplifted palms.

"We may as well go with him."

Ptal smiled again that saturnine expression. "The Tharn is a victim of conditioning," he said briskly, "but you should be ashamed of yourself, Jeff Jarvis! You are a Son of the Mighty, equipped with powers beyond reasoning." He gave the Earthman a sly look askance. "Perhaps that has been your trouble? You relied too much upon your powers and not enough upon reason! It should serve as a lesson to you. The Mighty were aware that honest reason transcended even their magnificent powers!"

They went in Ptal's company directly from Thanranarova to Surandanish, in a bullet-shaped car that hurtled at blinding speed through a tunnel buried a mile deep in the crust of the planet. This subterranean transportation system connected all the cities of the ancients that still existed upon the face of Eloraspon, Ptal told him, and this answered for Jarvis the question of how the Dingir came and went at will without being seen.

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Ptal chatted continuously, filling in the gaps in Jarvis' knowledge of Eloraspon. Eamus Brock had not been able to help the Somam with their problem. His great mind had been too preoccupied with the imminence of the impending nova and the problem of averting it.

"You think of us as men," Ptal said, "but this is not so. The Somam are not men in the sense of a race. A race has mothers and fathers. The Somam have none. The Mighty created us to serve them. We served them well. After they left our planet forever, we have continued to serve them by watching over as well as we have been able the seed they left behind. We are immortal in the sense that we cannot die, for we were never born."

"Machines!" said Jarvis. "I might have guessed it from the mechanical way your warriors fought in the shaft of Thanranarova."

"Partly true," agreed Ptal, "but there is one other factor. When the Mighty created us, they built into our beings a nonrevocable inhibition. No Somam can harm in any way one of the Mighty."

"Yet you have brought harm to the princess Ilil, who is a Child of the Mighty!"

"Not harm, Jeff Jarvis." A look of sadness spread over the Bronze Man's glistening features. "What we have done, we have done for her own good." He flashed the Earthman an honest glance. "You have been told of our choosing of the newborn. That is good. And you must have guessed that we chose only Children of the Mighty—those mutants who may one day again develop the race of the Mighty."

"What do you do with them?"

"We . . . segregate them." The hesitation in Ptal's tone was for only an instant, but Jarvis' quick ear detected it and he wondered. In answer to a further question, Ptal replied, "The Lulu are descendants of the race of the Mighty—so are the elementals—the Eeima, the Eltaroa and the rest."

IN spite of Jarvis' pointed questions on the subject, Ptal eluded him in the conversation and continued pleasantly on other subjects. In the city of Surandanish, they rose up the shaft together to the place of the archives of the Mighty.

"Here," said Ptal, "lie the answers to your questions." He gestured toward shelves extending from ceiling to floor, filled with cylindrical objects of metal. "Every floor, every room in this building is filled with these cylinders. They represent the massed knowledge of the race of the Mighty. You are welcome to consult them at will, even as Eamus

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Brock did. Over here is where he worked . . . I will leave you now. Later, I will bring the princess Ilil to you."

After Ptal departed, Thork grumbled, "Beware, Jeff Jarvis, the man who asks you to work for him but tells you not what the job is! That fellow has a way about him I do not like. He can't be trusted."

"Conditioning," laughed Jarvis. "You were taught from childhood to fear and hate the Dingir. You can't help feeling wary. You do not understand what they were doing in taking away some of your children."

"And I suppose you do?" sulked the Tharn.

"I assume that I do. I wondered why they did not attack me with violence. That question is answered. Because they can not. Neither can they harm any of the Children they took. Some day, Thork, you may understand."

"Be that as it may," the giant replied, "they have not hesitated to kill the Lulu when the occasion required it. I would see more of their good intentions before I passed judgment, if I were you."

Jarvis dismissed the Tharn's qualms, taken with the wonder of his surroundings. This was where Eamus Brock had worked and studied half a lifetime to defeat the forces of Nature! Here lay the wisdom, the know-how, which could make a new world of Eloraspon, a planet of civilization and scientific advancement. The key to the future lay in his hand!

There was a table there, and a bench. Upon the table lay a single cylinder. Jarvis knew how to get information from that inanimate metal. Eamus Brock had told him. He picked up the cylinder and held it in his palms, bending his faculties, piercing it with his Mag senses. The first words to impinge upon his brain startled him.

"My dear Jarvis!" The words, the intonation—it was the very voice of Eamus Brock! Jarvis shook his head and concentrated again.

"My dear Jarvis!" the cylinder resumed. "What a paradox this is that I speak to you whom I have never met while you listen, remembering what we already have been to each other! When you were a child, I picked your mind from a multitude and conditioned it for what lies ahead of you now—at this moment when you have picked up this record of my thoughts and begun to scan it.

"I am but one man and can do but one thing, and that thing is to avert the threatened nova. I can do that and Earth will live. You will some day return there. Does that come as a shock to you? Let me explain . . ."

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BROCK'S thoughts went on and on. Words, pictures, experiences, hurtled through Jarvis' mind, numbing him, saddening him. In brief scope, Brock condensed all that he had learned about the Mighty from this tremendous library.

"To save a world is one thing," Brock concluded tiredly. "To assume the power of Deity and affect its destiny is another. I am glad I do not have to make the choice confronting you. And yet, I know that however you do choose, it will be the right choice. It is up to you alone to judge the Mighty. God help you, Jeff Jarvis!"

The cylinder became inert in Jarvis' hands, but his mind still raced with thought. All his questions were answered. His future lay spread out starkly before him. Brock had said the choice was his, but he knew there was no choice. He must destroy the Soman for the greater good of Eloraspon, and he grasped within his mind the key to performing that deed.

Thork said, "You have the look of a dead man!"

"Dead?" Jarvis shook himself. "If it were only that!"

If only it were death! Destruction of the Somam would cost him more than life. It would cost him a dream—not in his lifetime would the Mighty walk again on the face of Eloraspon!

Thork grunted and doubled in pain. A spasmed expression twisted his tusked features. He straightened and smiled with an effort.

"You speak lightly of what is my prerogative, Jeff Jarvis!"

Jarvis stood, anxiety stabbing him. "Why do you say that, old friend?"

"Death has found his opportunity to be my host," Thork grimaced. "My belly churns with the tharn-sickness. I used the last of the drug yesterday!"

Jarvis began to laugh. Wild, ringing shouts pealed from his lips. He hurled the cylinder across the room. It bounded with a clanging noise from shelf-tier to shelf-tier, clattering to a stop against the wall. Thork looked bitter.

"Does it amuse you that death comes for me?"

Jarvis gripped the giant and hugged him with remorse.

"Could I make you live a thousand years, I would! Could I prevent what I must do, I would do that also! Each of us is lost, my Thork, each of us in his own, peculiar way . . ."

Thork looked puzzled. Jarvis gestured toward the cylinder.

Thork doubled again as cramps racked his giant frame and the agony wrung grunts from between his tusks. "Oh, this is ecstasy!" he groaned.

Jarvis made the giant lie upon

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the floor, loosened his trappings for comfort, and wiped away the sweat that dewed the broad, blue brow. There was an agony within him to match the suffering of the Tharn.

"He dies the tharn-death," said a voice dispassionately behind Jarvis.

There was a cry at the same time and the flutter of feminine garments. Ilil knelt opposite him and held Thork's hand, her eyes brimming with tears. Jarvis looked around at Ptal.

"Can you do nothing for him?"

"The Tharn are victims of their own foolishness. They cannot be helped."

"Is that why you have permitted them, of all the peoples of Eloraspon, to dwell in the cities of the Mighty?"

"The Tharn are the only race incapable of spawning a Child of the Mighty. Their use of the drug inhibits the mutation."

Jarvis looked again at Thork through tears blurring his sight.

"Take Ilil and go!" husked the Tharn. "Be gone from this evil place!"

Ptal gestured the Earthman aside. Jarvis looked pleadingly to Ilil and she nodded. Her delicate hand stroked the brow of the dying Tharn.

"I must ask you now the same thing we asked of Eamus Brock," Ptal began.

"You want the formula for creating the Somam," Jarvis said. "Eamus Brock recorded a cylinder and left it for me. He has told me everything. There is no such formula. The Mighty destroyed it before leaving Eloraspon. The Somam are deathless—their numbers could be made to increase until this world—and other worlds, too—would be overrun with them."

The Bronze Man smiled bitterly. "Once we yearned for that, Jeff Jarvis. Now we would be content to increase our number by one!"

"Why just one?"

"We need no more," said the Bronze Man enigmatically. "Him we would create free of the inhibitions with which the Mighty endowed the rest of us!"

What was Ptal trying to keep from saying? What was it he did not want Jarvis to know? Was it what he already knew—what Eamus Brock's cylinder had already told him? Suspicion flared in his brain. *The Somam did not want the Mighty ever again to return to Eloraspon.* One Somam with the ability to kill each mutant as it was born would insure that.

CHAPTER XIII

THAT woman there whose beauty enchants you," Ptal said bitterly. "Would you rather see her die now—or change slowly into a hideous monster? That

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is what will happen to her, Jeff Jarvis, for it has happened to every Child of the Mighty born upon Eloraspon."

Jarvis was stunned. Eamus Brock had said nothing of this in the cylinder.

He said, "I cannot believe that!"

Ptal shrugged. "I did not expect you to. It is a thing that must be seen to be believed."

"And I . . ?"

Ptal nodded. "But not so quickly, perhaps. You spent most of your years upon Earth, away from the influence of the Song of Power, which causes the change." He said, "Unhappy human beings! We have tried to save them without success. Our effort to transplant the race to Earth failed in its purpose . . ."

"The Sumerians!" Jarvis exclaimed.

Ptal nodded. "They were soon absorbed by the races of Earth," he said.

"You might have tried them out elsewhere," Jarvis said.

The Bronze Man made a negative movement of his head. "Where do you think the mutant spark in your own being came from? What we tried to stamp out here, we succeeded only in spreading to Earth! You and others like you are the result of that infection."

Jarvis was finding it hard to keep up. "Are you trying to say the Mighty did not breed true to species?"

"One child in many was born with the powers of Magnanthropus," said Ptal. The rest reverted to the human. The Mighty made themselves immortal with development of the Somam body, to which they transferred the power of their own intellects."

"This I know about," Jarvis put in. "They developed the Song of Power—a vast outpouring of energy that resulted from harnessing the heat and magnetism of the planet's core."

"You could not be a Son of the Mighty and not be aware of it," the Bronze Man returned. "The broadcast wave is received in the very walls of the buildings in every city throughout Eloraspon and rebroadcast on a heterodyned wavelength. In the days of the Mighty, power was thus furnished not only to maintain the Mighty themselves but also their machines and appliances.

"The Mighty inhabited not only this world but also Nanna, its satellite, and they built Munus for a world of rest and pleasure and set it to circling about Nanna. It is to Munus that we send the Children of the Mighty, where they go through thier change and die."

"No," said Jarvis. His cheeks had the pallor of death. "That is the second time you have said that and I refuse to believe it!"

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"The Mighty themselves knew it. It was their main reason for developing the Somam body. Immortality became a secondary benefit."

"Why don't you try to rediscover the formula of creation?" Jarvis asked.

"The Somam can neither create nor discover. We cannot even read the records the Mighty left for future generations of mutants. Our thoughts and acts were programmed before our creation. Like the computer that can solve a problem but cannot create one, we function within limits too narrow to help ourselves."

"I am no scientist to rediscover the secret for you," Jarvis protested. "So what happens now?"

"You and the woman must be taken to Munus to await the change . . . and death. There is not room on Eloraspon for more like the Sea People, the Eeima, the Eltaroa and the myriad others you have never met!"

JARVIS breathed hard, turning away from the implacable look of the Bronze Man. Ilil turn into a monster? Himself? No! He was no character in a fairy-tale but a living, breathing creature of flesh and blood, gifted with mental powers transcending the human! And he possessed, thanks to Eamus Brock's recording, the secret of the Somam's destruction.

There was a dull, chopping sound behind him and the voice of Thork, muffled with pain, gritted slowly.

"By my blade, this thing has died again, Jeff Jarvis! Take the maid and flee this accursed place!"

"I have made up my mind," Jarvis said, looking down on the motionless hulk of the Bronze Man.

"The others will come to seek this one," Thork said. "I can hold them here long enough for you to reach safety at the camp of the Lugal Elman."

"Is my father here?" gasped Ilil.

"He cannot be far away," Jarvis said. "He left Gipar when we did."

"So go!" cried the Tharn, shaking his tusked head vehemently.

Jarvis grasped the princess' hand. "Come!" he said. Thork leaned on his blade, watching them depart. Already in the throes of death, he was anxious to give what few hours of life remained to assure their escape.

As they sped from room to room in the great tower of archives, Jarvis said, "We dare not go to your father. The Somam would kill him and all his warriors to get us back. Did they tell you of our fate?"

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She nodded, her eyes large and dark with terror. "I am sick with the knowledge. But wherever you go, my love, there will I follow."

"They would destroy us as they have destroyed all our kind," Jarvis returned. "It is in my power to destroy them, and that is what I must do."

In the bowels of Surandanish was the Place of Power—the room from which the Mighty had controlled that great power source at the heart of their planet. Its location and a dozen ways to reach it were engraved upon his mind from the recording Eamus Brock had left for him. There was a single switch there, which, when opened, would shut off forever the Song of Power. The power source would be totally destroyed, the lights would go out in the cities of Eloraspon and they would sing no more to the Mag consciousness. More than this would happen, too, but he had no more time to consider. He lifted his hawk-like visage in an attitude of listening. A Bronze Man stepped through the far wall.

The Somam were alerted—Thork must be dead. He fled, dragging Ilil by the hand. They emerged into a corridor, almost in the middle of a body of Dingir. Jarvis plowed into their midst, hewing to right and left with his blade. The Somam fell back in confusion, barely able to defend themselves. Then they burst through and ran for their lives, the Bronze Men in hot pursuit.

Again and again, as he attempted to follow one of the routes imprinted upon his mind, he found the way blocked by masses of Bronze Men.

"We have but one more chance," he said to Ilil. "This way!"

He whirled to the wall at his left and stepped through pulling Ilil by the hand. They stood upon one of the thread-like aerial ways that stretched from building to building like a gossamer web. Narrow and fragile as it was, the walk neither trembled nor swayed under their pounding feet. Reaching the middle, Jarvis looked back. Dingir were pouring through the building wall and plunging to the detritus-choked street below! The way would not support them—only one of the Mighty could tread this aerial path! It was as if those ancient minds had foreseen this moment of pursuit and deliberately had prepared this escape.

JARVIS ran as if by instinct, following a trail almost as old as Time itself. For the moment the way was clear of Bronze Men—and then they had reached their goal. This was the place—the Place of Power—and Jarvis grasped the handle of the vital

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switch that meant the end of the Somam, the end of . . . what? He paused in hesitation.

"Wait, Jeff Jarvis!" spoke the voice of Ptal from the door through which they had entered.

The Bronze Man entered, followed by a horde of Somam. Jarvis lay a comforting arm across Ilil's shoulders and drew her to him.

"I hold your lives in my hand," he said to Ptal. "You know it."

Thirty feet away, the Bronze Man surveyed him pityingly. "And your own salvation, Jeff Jarvis, though you do not know it. When I tell you what opening that switch will do, you will let go of it as if it were hot!"

Jarvis looked at him bleakly. "I am committed to this," he said. "I know now that it was for this purpose alone that I came here. Eamus Brock left it to me to decide. I have decided. You cannot stop me from acting."

"We would not if we could, Jeff Jarvis. A million years is a long time. The Somam are old and weary, and the inhibition the Mighty endowed us with has prevented us throughout all this time from doing what you are about to do."

"You *want* me to open this switch?" Jarvis cried.

"That is all we have ever wanted, Jeff Jarvis. You have lost the fight and won it, too. Pull that switch and you and the maid will live—but the mutant spark within you dies with the Song of Power. The Mighty will not again walk the face of Eloraspon—not for millenia. By a single act you will create the human world I think your Eamus Brock envisioned."

"The Children of the Mighty, whom you have taken to Munus . . ." Jarvis croaked.

"There are no Children of the Mighty, Jeff Jarvis. Those we took to Minus have already changed and died. Do you believe now I told you the truth about yourself—about the Mighty? Like them, you exalted power above reason. Do not become the victim of their mistake."

"You wanted one more Somam—" Jarvis said slowly.

"Without inhibitions," Ptal interpolated.

"To pull this switch—"

"And set Eloraspon free!"

No man of greatness ever tarried upon decision. Jarvis flung his weight upon the switch.

CHAPTER XIV

THE Place of Power blacked out. A humming noise vibrated on the air, seeming to travel straight downward into the bowels of the planet. The floor heaved and Jarvis staggered against the switch panel, clasping Ilil in his arms. The planet rumbled as rock masses shifted. There was no longer an up or a down. He felt

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himself flung across the room, trying to protect Ilil's body with his own. Invisible things cracked, toppled and smashed. The dark was alive with noise.

To his dazed mind came a far off impression of reeling heavens, of a great wind that ripped across the wide places of the world; the seas dashed upon their shores. In Kullab, there was pandemonium as the Tharn fled shrieking from their dwellings gone suddenly dark and rocking upon their foundations. And through Jarvis' soul swept a paean of joy, the last whisper of a dying world, and he knew he had stayed true to the Seed of Eloraspon—to the Eeima, to the Eltaroa, to the Sea People and those others unknown who had hailed him as their savior. In the instant the power failed, they were gone—to rejoin the host of the Mighty somewhere in the void of space. Eloraspon would never see their like again.

The quaking of the planet's crust shuddered to a halt and blinding brilliance flooded the chamber. Not the soft, diffused glow they had known but a sharp, harsh light that issued from globes spaced in the cracked ceiling. Somewhere, a soft hum arose. Vibration quivered the walls and floor. The emergency power Eamus Brock had told him about.

The Mighty had prepared well —even a means of escape. Jarvis looked around the Place of Power at the sprawled bodies of the silent Somam, but his heart was not wrung by the sight. These were but machines, stilled now forever. His pain was for the brave Tharn who had held back pursuit those few vital minutes that had gained them their start.

Had the Somam truly wanted him to open that switch? Jarvis did not know. Had they told the truth about the Children of the Mighty—or had this but been a lie to cover deeds of murder? He would never know the truth now, for the records of the Mighty were forever destroyed with the ceasing of the Power.

A door opened in the wall with a whisper of sound. A small car rolled out upon the floor of the Place of Power. Jarvis helped Ilil into it and it began to move of itself, back into the opening in the wall. They were returning—going back to a world different from the one they had left. And they were different too. No longer the seed from which a race of supermen might spring. He had made his choice between power and reason, and reason had won. The return would be hard, but not unbearable.

He smiled down at the woman beside him. They embraced and their lips met. No matter what he had lost. *This* was the new world he had won. **THE END**

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A lot of people have fancy ideas about what Hell is. Arthur found out that all of them were wrong. Hell is . . . well——

HELL

By ROBERT ROHRER

THE sunbathers lay naked along the beach under the yellow sulfur-clouds that rolled darkly across the sky. Their eyes were closed; their mouths were open and filled with the dull lemon dust that had filtered down through the humid atmosphere and covered their bodies. They lay without moving, unaware of each other, unaware of the gray, filmy water that bubbled lazily only inches from their feet, unaware of the gritty mixture of ash and sand that bit into their backs. They lay there, like so many hot dogs coated with mustard.

Arthur threaded his way across the beach between the insensate sunbathers as carefully as he could, but it was not an easy thing to do because the bodies were packed shoulder to shoulder and they lay along the curve of the shore as far as Arthur could see in either direction. Once Arthur lost his balance and stepped on a bare chest to keep from falling, and his foot sank in up to the ankle, and he sprang back in disgust.

Arthur was fully clothed in a winter suit and an overcoat. He was very hot and he wanted to take his suit off, but he had a dim, uncomfortable feeling that if he tried to unclothe he would not be able to, so he did not try. He stumbled down the parabola of the beach, not quite sure of where he was going. He looked at the faces of the sunbathers, and sometimes he saw a face he thought he knew, but again he he was never quite sure.

He wondered why he thought of them as sunbathers when

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there was no sun. He had almost reached the water when suddenly he saw an open boat floating at a small wooden dock. There was a man in the boat. *You weren't looking hard enough,* thought Arthur. *You didn't see it.*

The man had a tail but Arthur did not think this odd. When Arthur got closer he saw that the man was not a man at all, but something else, something furry and fanged. Arthur did not think this at all odd. Everything that was happening seemed quite sensible to Arthur.

"Hello," said Arthur to the boatman. He still thought of the thing as a man, even though he saw plainly that it was a thing.

"Get in," said the boatman.

"Why do I—they—why do I think of them as sunbathers when there isn't any sun?" asked Arthur, feeling a little foolish.

"Who, the sunbathers?" said the boatman, leaning on his oar. He had pointed ears (*All boatmen have ears with points,* thought Arthur. *Only some have pointed ears, but that's the same, I guess, yes*). The ears twitched in the hot wind that sprawled across the water. "Get in," said the boatman.

Arthur got into the boat. He was very embarrassed because the boatman had not answered his question.

The boatman began to row, knotting the muscles of his arms and back and tearing open the surface of the water with his oar. Arthur felt no acceleration, but when he looked behind him after the first oar-stroke, the shore had almost disappeared in the distance. The sunbathers looked like tiny yellow vitamin capsules in a long, gray celluloid package.

ARTHUR looked ahead. The boat was going very fast, but it hardly seemed to be moving at all if he didn't look back.

"Are you the Devil?" Arthur asked the boatman.

"No," said the boatman, goring the water with his oar.

"Then you're—Charon. That's right, Charon, stupid of me." He squinted over the bow, but there was a mist ahead now, so he could see nothing except the weaving, simmering surface of the water, which blurred by degrees into obscurity. He shifted in his seat nervously. "Ah—am—I, am I going to be here long?" he asked.

"Forever," said the boatman. His voice was neither terrifying nor even very interested. He never looked at Arthur, only ahead or at the water as he pushed it aside.

So. Forever it is. Arthur was not frightened, he had just wanted to make sure. "I'm ready for it," he said aloud. "I've

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thought about it a lot, because I was pretty sure that if there was a place like this that I'd end up—here. So I've thought it all out, and I'm ready to take it, whatever you're going to do."

"I just row here," said the boatman.

"I mean—whatever whoever does it is going to do. I've had a lot of experience with psychology, and psychiatrists, and I'm ready. We've all figured out Hell up there, you know. Everybody knows how it works, now."

The boatman grunted.

Arthur said, "You read it in stories all the time, and some really good writers say it, too. Hell is, I mean, the greatest torture there is in this psychological torture. Psychological. Everybody thinks of Hell as being psychological now. Hell is people, that's Sartre; Hell is personalized mind-torments, that's Saki and others. Some people don't believe there's a *real* Hell, just one up there."

"They're halfway right," said the boatman, heaving the boat ahead with another tremendous stroke. The water spewed from under the bow in an unbroken translucent sheet.

"Well, I can take whatever you've thought up for me," said Arthur.

The boatman said nothing.

"You can't torture me with anything psychological," said Arthur. "I know about the mind. I know how to keep from letting things irritate me, and I don't want anything now I'm dead, you can't keep anything from me and do it that way."

"Then you should be happy here," said the boatman.

"Why—yes, I guess I will be," said Arthur. He still wanted to take off his clothes, but he did not let that bother him.

THERE was something ahead now, in the mist, something huge that lay across the water like a dead, bloated snake. Arthur became excited. This was going to be fun, when they found out they couldn't torture him. What would they do after they found out? Maybe send him away, so he could walk wherever he wanted to for all of eternity. He would go back up There, and see all the places he had never seen, and watch history march by, watch nations rise and rot and fall apart.

But he couldn't let himself want that too much, because they might keep him here anyway. They probably would. Arthur didn't really want anything any more. He was dead in every way a man can be dead. He had led a bad life, and he was glad to be dead, although he wouldn't be unhappy if they sent him back up There as punishment because there were a lot

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more things he could find to do on Earth.

The island was very close now. The wall of what must have been a huge crater curved up away from the river. The boat scudded against a tiny dock. The boatman leaped onto the platform and secured the boat with a rope. He straightened and motioned to Arthur. "Come on."

As he pulled himself onto the dock, Arthur decided to ask again the question that the boatman had not answered. "Why—"

"Because there is no sun where they are," said the boatman, walking away.

Arthur followed, tripping along behind the broad, swaying back of the boatman. "How did you know what I was going to ask?"

The boatman did not answer. They were moving up the side of the crater. The side of the crater paths had been gouged out up to the rim by countless transients. The path that the boatman and Arthur were taking came up to Arthur's shoulders. And the rock was hard, too.

Arthur's mouth was dry, and he was perspiring from more than the heat. This would be a great joke on the Devil.

They topped the rise and stood on the very narrow edge of the crater. Arthur stared, shocked.

The crater was vast, limitless, Arthur could not see the opposite side. But stretching away from the tips of his toes into the boundless distance was a howling, tumbling ocean of blue-white Fire.

The heat blasted into Arthur's face, and he reflexively stepped back. He turned to the boatman, who was looking down at something in the crater. Arthur said, "It's—it's fire!"

"Of course it's fire," said the boatman. "It always has been. And it always will be."

"But—but I can't stand fire!"

"Go on in," said the boatman.

"No! No! I can't, fire! My God, no!"

The boatman flinched. "Don't say that Word!" he shouted angrily. "Never say that *here!*"

Arthur looked back to the fire and a nearby flame curled up before his face and swayed whitely and invited him. It did not look like it would hurt. Arthur decided to test it, just to *test* it. He stepped closer to the edge of the crater and put his foot into the fire and there was nothing else there but fire and he fell in. Now suddenly he heard the screaming, the awful screaming that came from the Pit, and as he fell the screaming got louder and louder, and he thought he saw something big twisting below.

And it hurt.

It did hurt.

IT HURT.

THE END

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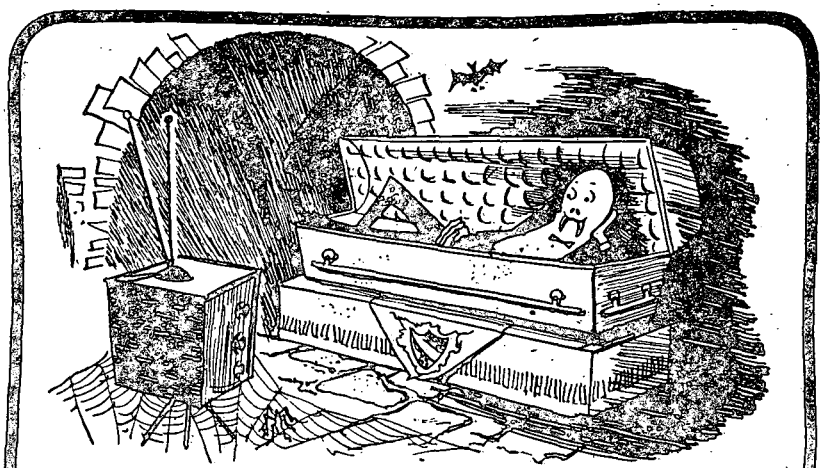

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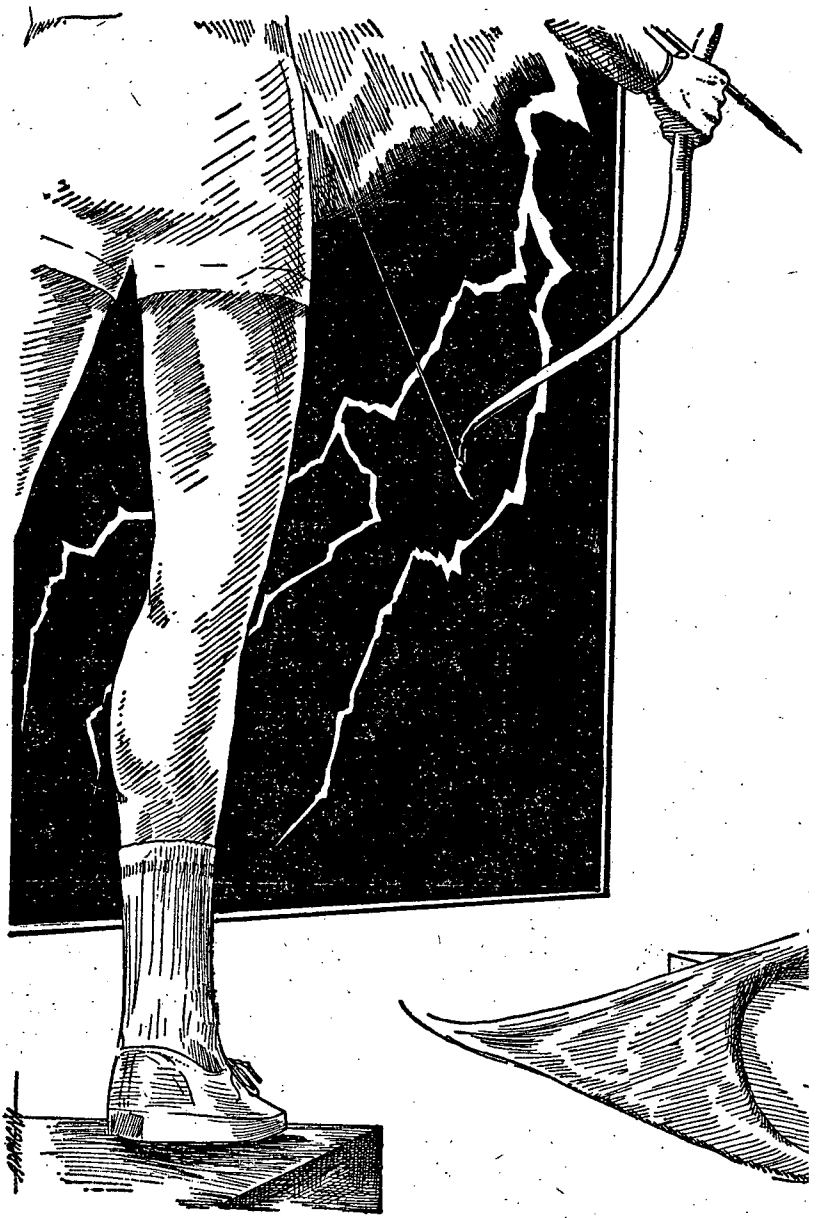

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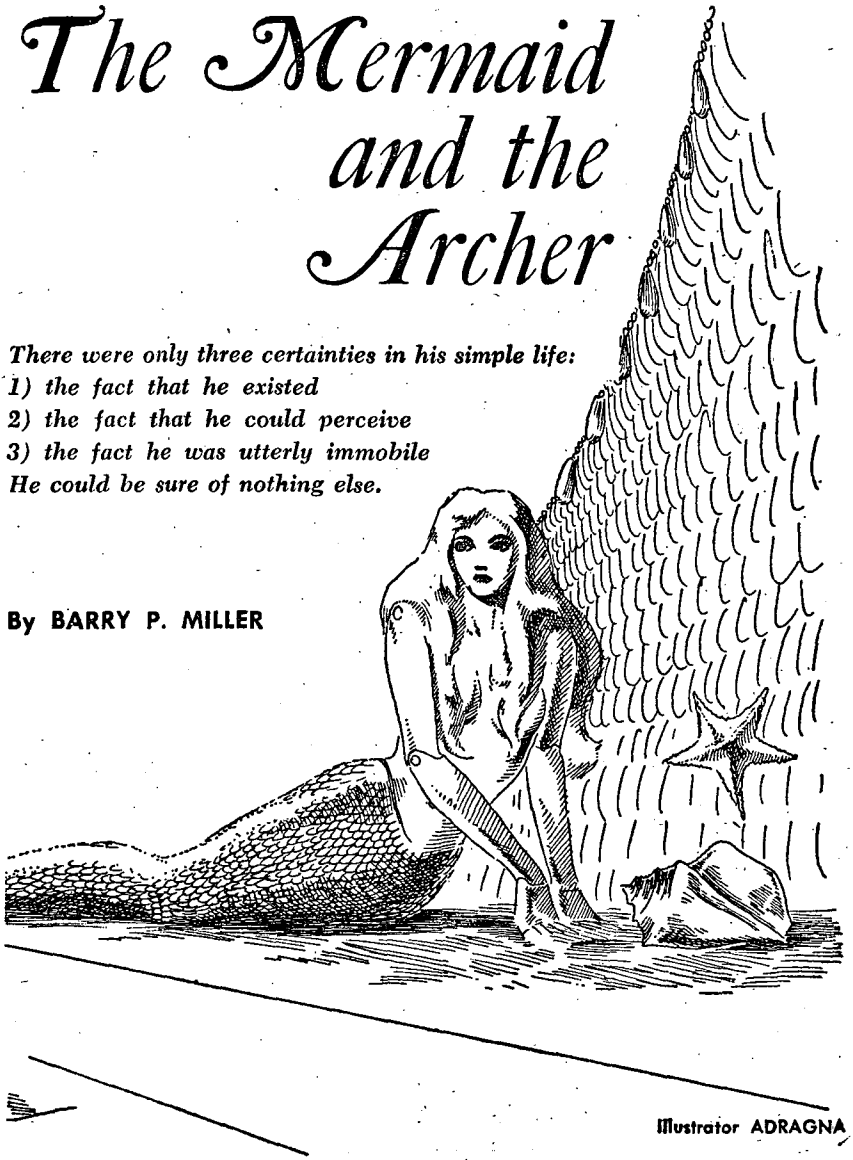
The Mermaid and the Archer

There were only three certainties in his simple life:
1) the fact that he existed
2) the fact that he could perceive
3) the fact he was utterly immobile
He could be sure of nothing else.

By BARRY P. MILLER



Illustrator ADRAGNA

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HE possessed no symbology with which to interpret the objects of his perception. He could only wonder about them. He wondered why there was a transparent barrier in front of him. He wondered about the markings on it:

SPORTING GOODS

He wondered about all the things he saw beyond the barrier. He wondered why the sky was sometimes blue, sometimes grey, sometimes black and sprinkled with tiny lights. But most of all, he wondered who he was and how he had come to be.

His earliest memories were dominated by a face. He had no way of knowing it was an old face, lined and weatherbeaten, or that its clear blue eyes were filled with a strange commingling of sorrow and love. He did know that his memories of the face disturbed him profoundly. The face had passed out of his life, leaving a hollowness for which he had no name.

Regularity had come into his life with the passing of the face. There were times when whiteness fell from somber skies. He would be bundled into bulky garments, and long wooden things would be fastened to his lower extremities. When the whiteness turned to wetness and the light of day lingered longer in heaven, high rubber boots would be put on him and a pole-like affair with a reel and cord would be fixed in his hands. Then the season of the sun would arrive, and a stick bowed by taut twine would be placed in his hand, crossed by a feathered wooden shaft tipped with steel. The routine never changed. He had no way of counting how many of its long cycles he had been through. He could only watch the throngs that bustled at regular hours beyond the transparent barrier while his life stretched out into a span of impotent wondering. If he could have chosen a word to describe his condition, the word would have been loneliness.

A SEASON of the sun came, and his life was changed. He was stripped of his boots, pole and reel. Bright new attire was put on him and the bow and shaft were fixed in his grip. He was moved around in the process. When the adjustments to him were completed, he found that his immobile eyes were gazing directly into another pair of eyes.

They were a deep and luminous green. If he had ever seen the sea, those eyes would have caused him to think of the sea. They were set in a pale oval face framed by long waves of platinum hair. He needed no words to know that the face was beautiful.

The face was upheld by a neck as an ivory column that was joined to a lithe, graceful torso.

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Halfway down the torso was transformed into a shape outside all his experience. He had never seen a fish. But the newness of what he was seeing did not alter his initial wordless impression of beauty.

With the edges of his immovable vision, he could see the objects that surrounded her. There were pairs of webbed elongated things. There were cylinders and hoses. There were long spear-like things with straps and cord. A feeling deep within him seemed to tell him that these objects were out of place in dryness, in air.

He swiftly returned to rapt contemplation of those luminous green eyes staring so directly into his. Long ago he had known something that might be called happiness, in the days of the lined old face with the clear blue eyes. The memory of it had nearly faded. Now happiness was being reborn in him. But a discomfort which a man might have called anxiety was being born along with it.

The anxiety came from those green eyes into which he stared so steadily. They seemed to be pools filled with dark flitting forms of urgency. Dimly within his voiceless being, the idea of a loneliness other than his which was greater than his was taking shape. It aroused a troubled wonder in him. Were there others as himself, immobile ones, lonely ones, standing stiffly forever behind their transparent barriers and staring with unblinking eyes at the world without?

He wanted desperately to ask the owner of those wondrous eyes, *Are you such a one?* But even if he had possessed the words to clothe the concept in symbolic form, he lacked the motility to send the message on its way. His growing awareness of his impotence became his first insight into the nature of despair.

HE ached with that insight while, beyond the transparent barrier, the sun sank behind buildings in the west and the heavens turned from blue and fleecy white to a riot of crimson and gold. It was the time of day when the throngs beyond the barrier swarmed most thickly. Presently the throngs thinned, and darkness flowed as some intangible tide through the streets. The advent of dusk filled him with a concern he had never felt before. The thickening dimness was veiling those eyes which had brought him such strange joys, such odd pains.

Before the dusk deepened into true night, the street-lights came on. Their soft yellow glow made she whom he beheld even more an object of mystery and wonder than she had been throughout the day. Her urgency and her beauty had been heightened so that it

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was almost more than he could bear to look at her. Never in his existence had he known such turmoil. Then the wordless thought occurred to him, *Is she as distressed as me?*

It was terrible for him to think of her suffering from an inner upheaval such as his. He wanted overwhelmingly to be of comfort to her. His powerlessness was now more intolerable than the sum of the day's anxiety. He could not know that he loved, but he was enduring some of the pains that love can cause.

The sight of her, the acute consciousness of her, was filling all his horizons. She lay motionless and alone in the street-light's glow, her hair a pale silver cloud, her face half in concealing shadow, her eyes shining as if energized by some huge desperate emotion burning beyond them.

The loneliness and urgency churning inside him did not seem to be entirely his own. Some of that agitation seemed to belong to Another. Stirrings and murmurings came to him from both without and within. He did not understand them; he could not respond to them. At his lack of response, they seemed to withdraw into a darkness, a pain. He did not want them to go away. It was as if they were a fragile connection with a strange and intense Other. He had no way to tell them to come back. He could not strain after them with his body, so he strained after them with his soul.

Suddenly the Otherness was all around him. It was warmth and goodness. It was coming from her. It *was* her! She caused great joyous throbbings and chimings to reverberate through his soul. He acknowledged the fact of her presence with a surge of raw wordless happiness. It was as if an awful hollowness in him, a core of incessant hungering, had suddenly been filled. He gave himself up completely to the greatest joy he had ever known.

The high pallid pastels of approaching dawn were staining the eastern skies before he came enough out of his joy to direct a voiceless querying at the Other. He was tentative and anxious. He wanted to ask her, *Who are you?* But he had no language with which to frame the thought. Would she understand him?

He was enveloped in her compassion. She understood. She created pealings in his soul and associated them with herself. If he could have understood speech, those pealings would have been a silvery voice saying, *I am the Mermaid.*

She saw that he did not understand. She tried to reassure him. She created an image of herself in his soul and made it smile. But he did not know what a smile was.

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He waited in eagerness and wonder for her to do more. She was not daunted. With an eagerness to match his, she tackled the task of building up in his spirit the complex symbology which, in terms of print or sound, is human language.

His education had finally begun.

HE learned quickly. Physically they were little more than wood and fiber and metal. They had no need for sleep. They remained in constant mental communion. By concentrating her whole attention upon him, inspired by a wealth of love, she gave him the gift of language in less than a month.

She told him her story. She had come into being many years ago, in a far-away land across the sea. He had no idea of the sea. She showed him its image in her memory, the huge splendid sweep of surging water under a tall clear sky. He was enthralled and amazed. He told her that her eyes were the color of the sea. She gave him a smile of her spirit and went on with her story.

Her first memories were of a kindly middle-aged man with vital blue eyes. She showed him the image in her memory. He was filled with wonder. That face and those eyes belonged to the same man who haunted his own memories. Only, in his memories, they seemed older. He told her. She said she was not surprised.

She had been a puppet, she explained. She told him what a puppet was. The man with the vital blue eyes had been a puppet master. He had made her with care and love. With the same care and love, he had made her perform in exquisite little fantasies before rapt audiences. It had been a very happy time for her. She had loved being made to perform. She had loved the admiration his small audiences of children and adults had felt for her. She had learned the intricacies of language when her master would sometimes talk to her, in the lonelier hours of the night. His secret sadness was that his wife had died. His puppets were his chief consolation, and of all his creations he was most proud of her.

Then a time of evil had come. Fire and thunder had fallen screaming from the skies. Men with the grimmest faces she had ever seen came marching through the streets. The blue eyes of her master had clouded over with a sickness obviously of the soul as he beheld the ruin of much that he held dear. He had not been able to endure it. He had fled across the breadth of the sea with his puppets.

In the new land, he learned to his sorrow that people were not much interested in puppets. They

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were too busy with the war. He endured many lean days, and sometimes had no place to sleep nights. But he did make a few new friends, and they tried to help him by suggesting he apply his talents to something other than puppetry. He found work with a place that made store-window mannikins. All his funds ran out before his first paycheck was due. He brought her, his most cherished creation, to his place of work and asked if he could have money for her. He was paid a small sum for her. In the years that followed she never saw him again. Her loneliness had been great. She concluded by saying, *I dread to think how much greater it might have become if it were not for you.*

One thing bothers me, he said. *We are made from materials that are not living. Why can we see, and feel, and think? What are we?*

I do not know, she said. *I can only guess. He who made us loved his work with all his soul. Once he said that a true artist tries to put his soul into his work. We may have grown into what we are from bits of his soul.*

He thought about that for a while. At last he said, *He named you Mermaid. I think he had a name for me when he was making me. I cannot remember it. Wonder what it was.*

We'll probably never know, she said. *He called me Mermaid because that's what I am. You're a store window dummy. But Dummy doesn't seem right.*

I think I'm also called a mannikin, he said.

Mannikin doesn't feel right either, she answered.

Must I stay nameless?

No. You're holding a bow and arrow. Archer is a common name. I'll call you Archer.

He said, *I don't always have the bow and arrow. Summer is going away. Soon they will dress me up for winter.* Dread went through him. *What if they put you away?*

Her thought quivered with fear. *Don't think of it. Let's just be glad that we have each other even if it is only for a little while.*

IT was not easy to avoid thinking of how they might be separated. Sometimes it cast a pall over them like the pall the August thunderheads would cast over the city before giving monstrous birth to torrents and lightning and rolling thunder. Sometimes it drove them to find things they could share with each other within the limited range of their perception. From the corners of their eyes they would watch the pale beauty of a clear day's dawning with mute appreciation. Or they would speculate with each other about the causes of the ecstasies or sorrows on the face of people who peered in at them.

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Not too many people looked at them. The throngs were always hurrying. Those who did stop to look were mostly oldsters or wide-eyed children. There were exceptions. Late one night a drunken man staggered against the shop front. His clothes were expensive but disheveled. He put his hands on the window to steady himself, and saw the Mermaid. He stiffened and stared for a long time. Finally he gasped, "Jeanne!" and broke into muffled crying. He lurched off into the night, still crying.

The Archer was disturbed. *The sight of you caused him pain. How can that be?*

The world is full of mysteries, she said, *and not all of them are happy. I fear I reminded him of someone he has lost.*

Then they realized that once again their talk had led them to the thought of their possible separation, and the sadness of the thought stayed with them the rest of that night. It might have lasted throughout the following day, had not another exception materialized from the world beyond.

There was a thundershower that noon. Lightning writhed across dusky churning heavens. Thunder rattled the store window in its frame. Rain came in such cascades that it drove the throngs off the streets. People took refuge beneath the awning over the storefront, waiting for the rain to ease. Presently it slacked off, and in ones and twos the people left. All but one.

He was a large man. His hair was unruly and dark, his eyes gray and very alert. He wore an old brown overcoat. His hands stood out in sharp contrast against the dark fabric, and seemed to be too slender and fine to belong to his massive frame. He was studying the Mermaid closely, and talking to himself. The quiet after the storm brought his words to the Mermaid and the Archer: "Who would have dreamed to find such artistry in this part of the city?"

He put his nose to the window to see her better. "You're lovelier than any store window dummy has a right to be," he said. Then he noticed how her joints were articulated. "You're also lovelier than any puppet has a right to be."

The Archer, watching him from the corners of his eyes, felt something a man would have called jealousy. It was a new, a painful emotion for him to feel. It was mixed with pride at having a real person praise the Mermaid's beauty. The Mermaid sensed what he was feeling and folded him in the warmth of her love to reassure him.

Even as she did so, her admirer outside pressed still closer against the window and said, "It's not that platnium mop of

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yours that makes you beautiful. It isn't the way you're carved, either. It's your eyes. They ache with a fullness of love. Who do you love?"

He looked around the scene within the window. "You could not be so full of love unless its object were closer," he said. He followed the Mermaid's line of sight with his gaze. He saw the Archer at the same instant that the sun came out from behind the ragged wrack trailing after the storm.

He studied the Archer in musing silence. "You," he said at last. "Yes, you. It has to be you." He let his gaze linger on the bow and arrow. "That's a nasty thing you've got there. Don't you know she loves you? Point that thing somewhere else."

The Archer asked the Mermaid, *What does he mean?*

I didn't explain before because I didn't want to sadden you, she answered. *Bows and arrows are not used for sport. Men have crippled and killed each other with them.*

Is the one I'm holding aimed at you?

Yes.

I wish it weren't.

I know. It's not your fault. fault. Don't worry about it.

The man outside said, "You wish you weren't pointing it at her. You're as full of love for her as she's full of love for you." He turned his back to them and surveyed the dingy shopfronts across the street, the grey skyscrapers looming beyond, the dissipating tatters of the storm farther beyond.

"This place is dismal and forlorn," he said. He turned and faced them again. "You contrast with it like twin luminaries in a realm of shadow. How's that for poetic metaphor?"

He shook his head. "I'm no poet. I couldn't do you justice with verse, blank or otherwise. But I know what I can do." He reached into a voluminous pocket of his overcoat and withdrew a sketch pad. "I hope I can finish the preliminary sketches by sunset. I'll come back tomorrow to get the colors right. Only oils will bring you to life."

He said no more. He sketched until the sun sank behind the silhouettes of the western skyscrapers and the only light came from the high flaming afterglow.

IT stormed again towards midnight. The Archer saw how the savage glare of the lightning could not make the Mermaid's loveliness harsh. Wind howled between the boomings of the thunder, and drove rain before it with such force that it racketed off the display window. Now and then there came gusts so powerful that the dry old timbers of the shop bent and groaned.

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The violence outside aroused somber thoughts in them. *It reminds me of the war across the Sea, long ago,* said the Mermaid.

The Archer was reminded of what he held. He said, *It still hurts me to know that I am aiming an implement of war at you.*

Please don't trouble yourself with such thoughts, she implored.

It is my powerlessness that hurts, he said. *I do not want to point this thing at you. But my will is impotent to turn it aside.*

She tried to soothe him. *That is why you should not let it trouble you. Don't chafe over what you can't help.*

It feels wrong, he insisted. *We are so similar to people. We think and see and feel even as they do. But they can move while we cannot. Is it our lot to be forever impotent, forever immobile?*

She could not sigh with her nonexistent breath, so she sighed with her soul. *They are made of living tissues. We are not. We are only dead dry wood, and cloth, and bits of glass and metal.*

Can seeing, feeling and thinking beings be dead? he argued. *We are such beings. Surely we have life of a sort! It is unthinkable that we should be utterly impotent!*

Please! she begged. *Remember that your pain is mine also.*

It was as if he had not heard her. *Before people can move, they must will themselves to move. Somehow their bodies translate the will to motion into actual motion. Our bodies are not the same as theirs. We are alive, nevertheless. Perhaps we too could move if only we willed to firmly enough.*

Oh, Archer, she said. *You'll only frustrate yourself.*

Lightning sheeted overhead, turning the storming night into a brief garish parody of day. The sudden light gave the Archer's features a grimness and a determination the Mermaid had never seen before. He said, *Before you came, my loneliness and ignorance were a direct consequence of my impotence. If they put you away with the advent of winter, it will be my impotence that will imprison me in a loneliness infinitely worse for having known you. I cannot bear to think of it. I must will myself to potency.*

She was awed by his insistence, his vehemence. Her love went out to him like some invisible flame. *What will you do?*

First I will point this weapon away from you, he said.

His hand holding the bow was well inside his field of vision. He concentrated upon it. It seemed miles away. He willed it to move. It remained immovable. He had a dim intuition of how a man might feel entombed beneath tons of resisting granite. He thought of the consequences if he remained impotent. *Move,* his

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soul screamed at his wooden hand. *Move!*

LIGHTNING wove traceries of pitiless sunfire beneath the driving clouds. In that jumping glare, shadows flew. Had his hand moved, only a little, a little? Had it? Darkness and thunder fell almost simultaneously. It was impossible to tell. Wind roared along the street. The building groaned.

Now the only light came from the streetlamp. It was softened and diffused by crashing volumes of rain. There was just enough to show him the Mermaid. Her hair was a wan ghostly cloud about her. Her eyes were twin green stars whose light seemed to come from the love within. The storm outside was a forerunner of winter. He tried to imagine existence without her.

The unbearableness of his imagining sent him into a frenzy. He concentrated the whole of his spiritual resources upon his hand. *Move.*

A gust drove out of the storm that was stronger than any other. The whole shop shook. The Archer's hand seemed to twitch. It was enough! The bow had been fixed in his hand with a minimal tension on the string to achieve a realistic effect. It twanged almost too faintly to be heard above the storm. The arrow was in flight.

There was not much power behind it. But it was a hunting arrow, and it's tip was razor-edged and heavy. It ghosted past the Mermaid and lost itself in the shadows beyond her; an instant later, there was a crackling and a flaring of sparks. The steel head had buried itself in an exposed wire.

What happened? asked the Mermaid.

An exultation that approached madness was filling the Archer. *I moved! I moved!*

A flickering reddish-orange light was growing in the shadows behind the Mermaid. She could not see it, but a coldness went through her. She said, *Archer, I'm frightened.*

The reddish-orange light swelled into a great bloom of flame. The shorted, overheated wires had set fire to the tinder-dry ancient wood of the shop. The glow of the flames illumined both the Mermaid and the Archer. *What is it?* he asked.

I saw it during the war. It is fire. It is terrible.

What will it do?

If it spreads, it will destroy us, she answered.

Mermaid, he said.

She sensed a strangeness in his thought. *Yes?*

I think I caused the fire.

How?

With the arrow, he said. *It flew away from me into darkness.*

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There was a flash of light. The fire is growing out of where the arrow went.

The floor was ablaze. Tongues of fire were creeping toward the Mermaid. She felt the Archer's thoughts dissolve into anguish. *Oh, Mermaid! I wanted to find some way to keep us together! I have destroyed us!*

I love you, Archer. I do not blame you. How could you possibly have foreseen what would happen?

The flames no longer crackled. They roared. They reared over the Mermaid. They were so close that their heat was causing the fabric of her tail to smoke and char. The Archer knew the meaning of horror as he became aware that no power of his could avert the doom that was upon her.

Her eyes were calm. Filaments of flame curled, almost tenderly, around her face. But they were without compassion. Her hair as pale and cool as the light of stars was darkening, darkening and smouldering, and her painted skin was charring . . . and suddenly she was the center of a column of flame, and her grave beautiful eyes were the only parts of her that were not burning; they still looked into his own, full with a love he could no longer endure, telling him, *It doesn't hurt. I cannot feel physical pain. It is the knowledge that we are losing each other which sears me.*

Her blackened form flared one last time then crumbled into ashy ruin. He groped in an absence, an emptiness, where before he had felt the warmth of her presence. *She is gone.*

The knowledge was so dreadful that, if he had had a flesh and blood brain, he would have gone mad. He was dimly aware through the dullness of his despair that he was surrounded by fire. The string of his bow was smoking. A tongue of flame licked up in front of his eyes. A chaos of moving, malevolent brightness was all he could see. Far away a wall of darkness appeared. It grew and grew until all else was lost, for ever.

* * *

In the loneliness of a bare studio, an artist worked for long weeks, painting. Once he said, "Such love should not pass from the earth."

The darkness was riven with light, and he held a miracle in his arms. *Mermaid!*

Oh, Archer!

No one could look at the painting without being deeply moved. All who saw it were haunted long afterward both awake and in dreams by the remembrance of a joy which passed all understanding. **THE END**

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Daughter of the Clan

By WILTON G. BEGGS

Teen-agers are notoriously restless. Some more than others—Molly more than most!

WHEN Molly crashed beyond the barrier of her sixteenth birthday, she realized she was no better. Each night became more onerous than the last. The bulimia flourished, and her indulgent parents' ignorance of her condition grew difficult to bear.

By her secret admission that she was not normal, Molly unlocked a dungeon in her mind that could never be shut up again. Doubts she had tried to entomb since the age of twelve—eleven years and nine months after being selected by Mr. and Mrs. Smith at Shawville Orphanage—gnawed at her constantly. She borrowed thick psychology books from the local Carnegie library. She hoped to unearth an explanation of the enigma.

Her perusal of the musty tomes was unproductive. In her thirst for enlightenment Molly found scant similarity between herself and the hagridden creatures of the books, with their neurotic or psychotic conundrums.

"Because of deep psychological causes", or "to prove sexual adequacy", or "to relieve emotional tension" the pages iterated ad infinitum—and about the antisocial manifestations of any number of mental abnormalities.

"What can this have to do with *me?*" Molly pondered finally, becoming bored with the search. "Until the hunger I was a perfectly ordinary girl. I don't recall being unhappy, despite the mystery of my birth. Wasn't I but one of many babies whose real mothers have abandoned them on the steps of some foundling home at one time or another? The love of my adopted parents more than compensated for that."

Yet, Molly was forced to concede, the bulimia *had* been engen-

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dered, and increasingly now she was concentrating on nothing but it.

Molly felt confident, however, that the permutation had been in some way physical, an internal, chemical shift rather than a simple explosion in her brain. None of the dusty volumes seemed to consider this. The stress placed on psychological factors in almost all cases of mental aberration reassured her. It intimated that her difficulty belonged to a different realm from the maladies analyzed in the tedious books. She had been taught by Mom and Dad that the soul is master to the body—therefore, she retained some threads of her faith that she could stifle the demon inside her.

But faith could not prevent Molly from being lonely. Even seventeen-year-old Tom Dixon, her perennial boy friend, seemed alien to her now. It was as if she no longer shared the same human heritage with him. Molly longed for new companions, yearned desperately for, somehow, an intimacy with folk of her own bizarre kind.

ON a balmy Saturday evening shortly following her birthday, Molly ventured her first step into the new and beckoning world of the bulimia. She had consumed the past several evenings with Tom, had actually gone nowhere after dark except in his company for almost three months, in fear of her actions if she were alone at night. But that wonderful week in late Spring she realized abruptly that she could deny the demon no further.

Unlike most modern teenagers of the United States, Molly had no interest in motion pictures. She was well aware that the Technicolor musical playing at the Arcadia, ten blocks from her home, would bore her thoroughly. She decided to go to the theater, nevertheless. The hunger was goading her onward with expanding glee.

Molly had already quarreled with Tom Dixon that remarkable week. His friendship meant so little to her now that she sundered it one aggressive morning in a quick blaze of contemptuous epithets. Shocked to the marrow by her virulent withdrawal of a charming teen-age affection, the hurt boy had immediately formed a tenuous attachment to another girl. The girl's name was Magda Nagy, a rather wanton young minx who lived across town in the "Little Balkans" section of the city. Since few one-hundred-percent Americans in Molly's district of Shawville approved of the city's hordes of postwar immigrants from southeastern Europe, it was patent that Tom was seeking a debauch to soothe the pain Molly had cre-

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ated in his lovelorn young heart.

His present design for the Saturday evening meshed with Molly's hidden desires nicely. Allowing her parents to think she and the unsuspecting youth would attend the theater together, Molly waited calmly on the front porch of the Smith house for him to leave his home next door. When she observed him walking toward his automobile in the driveway, she told her gentle mother and father good-by, and went to join him.

"Drop me off at the Arcadia," she muttered sweetly, falling into step. "The movie there is fine, they say."

The boy halted at once, glaring in angry surprise. Molly's mad impudence seemed to render him fairly dizzy with emotion. Anyone of normal sensibility would have discerned by her manner, by the sly, glassy stare in her jet eyes, that this was a person bent on mischief that night.

"Let me out at the corner of Ithaca Street," she said, as if they were still the best of friends. "I'll walk on to the theater. I have it planned. I'll see the movie twice, then meet you back at Ithaca after you've taken Magda Nagy home from that stupid dance in Little Balkans she's dragging you to. I don't mind waiting if you're late. I'll ride back here with you, and Mom and Dad won't know my date was with someone else. See, darling?"

As Molly had expected, Tom was both dumbfounded and outraged by the brazen suggestion. From the time they were infants in their cribs she had dominated him by sheer force of will, however. This strange night was no exception.

"I hate you, Molly Smith," he cried bitterly, as they rode down the avenue toward Ithaca Street. "You're treating me more like a dog all the while! I *won't* leave you there. Don't you realize how many brutes hang out at the Arcadia on Saturday night?"

"Then let me out here, love. I'll walk home."

MOLLY chuckled, tossing her raven-black hair back from her face in a misty cloud, knowing he fathomed by her mocking tone that she would do no such thing.

"Who're you meeting tonight?" Tom asked in a stricken voice. His blond head was a blur of unhappiness in the glow of the dashboard. "Who's so terrible that you don't want your parents to even guess he's your new boy friend?"

Laughing, Molly made no reply to the bewildered questions. Though he was furious with her, and agonizingly wounded at heart, she was certain Tom would do finally as she demanded. By the time they reached Ithaca

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Street she had teased and browbeaten the confused youth into a reluctant acquiescence.

This did not mean she was allowed to escape from his automobile without more indignant accusations. At length, Tom extracted a vow from Molly that she would stay inside the theater with her undisclosed admirer until Tom returned to the corner at eleven o'clock.

Molly did not doubt that he would return much sooner in an effort to forestall the folly he had read in her eyes. With this in mind she left the theater at nine. She was anxious to depart: her mission was accomplished.

The theater had been crowded from the Little Balkans district with many noisy young people just beyond Gilbert Park to the west. Inhabited for the most part by first-generation immigrants from Greece, Yugoslavia, and Hungary who clung stubbornly to their old-country cultures, the Little Balkans slum contained more than its share of juvenile delinquents caught between the two distinct sections of the city. From the instant she entered the dilapidated lobby until she stood again beneath the garish marquee, Molly had heard less than half the dialogue from the screen.

All around her had been a tumult of laughter, catcalls, bickering, outright fighting, as the socially jumbled youngsters of Little Balkans expressed their resentful scorn for even the elementary rules of decorum in a public place. The management had surrendered any attempt to control the Saturday-night mob, Molly noted with gratification.

Twice she had gotten up and moved to another seat in the seething balcony. She stopped moving when attention was bestowed on her by a half-drunken young man probably of Magyar blood. When he discovered she was alone his strongly accented comments from the seat behind her were stunningly lewd.

The man, bored and menacing, was somewhat older than most of the other males present, perhaps in his mid-twenties. Molly had never seen him before, but that was of no consequence to her plan. Her breathing became difficult as the lights of the theater faded behind her.

SHE walked down the sidewalk toward the corner where she was to meet Tom Dixon later. The part of the street where she tarried was all but deserted. Few cars went by, and the small shops on either side of her were locked and dim, with only an occasional bulb burning feebly in the rear.

Molly was beginning to grow anxious before she became certain she was being followed. The man from the balcony came up

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quickly. He laughed as she swung toward him with a gasp of pretended fright.

Molly's racing heart pounded faster with each moment that passed. She glanced up and down the empty sidewalk warily. So far so good.

"Hello." The Magyar was leering at her with unvarnished lust. "What's a pretty girl like you doing out here alone, sexy?"

Molly had already concluded that even at his best he would be considered a very bad product of the Little Balkans area. His greasy brown hair and sideburns were much too long. His clothes were unlaundered, and his mustached face had hardened since childhood in a sneer proclaiming respect for none of society's conventions. Yet, Molly deemed him a basically handsome, healthy animal—and that was all she required of a man tonight.

She turned on her heel, moving away from him.

"Don't be bashful, sexy," he snickered.

Molly was a quarter of a block from the street lamp on the corner. The remainder of the stores and shops were darkened. The sidewalk was a mass of indistinct shadows beneath her feet. Confidently she took an experimental step onward.

"No," he said.

The low humor was gone from his voice. He darted around her and blocked the way with outstretched arms. Molly motioned as if to brush past him. He shoved her roughly.

She was overwhelmingly excited now. She almost shouted in triumph as he grabbed her wrist in a vise of fingers. She groaned with the splendor of the moment.

He pinned her against the brick wall of a shop, and she struggled in order to spur him to crueler excesses. In the thick shadows she could barely see his brutal face. The rasp of alcoholic breathing was magnified in the darkness.

"Feel this?" The Magyar lay something hard and cold against her cheek. "That's a knife, pretty girl."

Molly was quivering uncontrollably. Never in her brief existence had she been half so thrilled.

"I won't hurt you if you're sweet to me," he taunted her. "But if you yell, who'll know? They're making such a din at the theater they'd never hear."

Pawing her drunkenly he pushed Molly back into the doorway of a shop. The flat of the knife slapped her cheek again. He stumbled, then scurrilously cursed her, as if his clumsy blundering were her fault.

A doorknob bit into Molly's spine. A whisky scent and the sweaty smell of his body hemmed her in. Aggressive hands fumbled at her dress.

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Suddenly the bulimia took on a fiercer fire, the glorious heat of it roaring higher and higher in her heaving breast. Molly simply could not hold back the growl any longer. She let it come, plunging upward out of her tooth-sharp mouth in a hideous, gleaming bellow of bestial sound. She howled louder, and embraced the startled man in a circle like crushing steel.

The knife hit the concrete with a dull clatter. The Magyar was paralyzed a moment by horror. Then he screamed. He shrieked once more in a frenzied, certain knowledge of what clasped him. He kept screeching until Molly found his throat.

* * *

TWENTY minutes later Molly threw the slumped body aside into the shadows. Fastidiously she wiped her dainty lips on a handkerchief she had tucked in her bosom for this purpose before leaving home. She smoothed her rumpled clothing carefully. Too much enraptured to do anything except act with a demented aloofness, she walked from the door and went quietly on down the sidewalk to the glowing street lamp on the corner. She had stood there only a moment, shivering with ecstasy, when an automobile stopped at the deserted intersection.

The ancient car—she saw with dawning fascination—was a veritable museum piece. A long black brougham, it was in a remarkable state of preservation. Something about the odd vehicle, something she sensed instinctively, caused Molly to lean forward in puzzled anticipation.

She smiled as a venerable old man—a Gypsy by his garb and complexion—hobbled down with great dignity from the roofless driver's seat. Leaning on a gold-knobbed walking stick he was nearly to Molly when an elderly woman in the rear of the car stuck out her head and spoke to him in a language that was totally strange, but had still, somehow, a familiar lilt to Molly's uncomprehending brain. Without turning the Gypsy signaled that he understood the woman's instructions.

The golden hoops at his ears swung to and fro as he stepped upon the curb and doffed his cap to Molly in a bow. The seamed face was radiant with perverse thanksgiving. His silvery poll shone brightly in the blue light of the street lamp.

"Thou hast apprenticed meetly, Mistress," he whispered in a curious accent so thick that Molly could hardly follow the words. "Thy illustrious grandmamma is much pleased. Verily, thou hast proved thy birthright this fair night."

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As frail and outlandish in appearance as her servant, the old lady in the automobile was staring at Molly. Her snowwhite hair was curled elaborately, and the snaky tresses flowed past her bony shoulders in rivers of ribbons and pale waxen flowers. Sunken cheeks coquettishly roughed, the hag seemed a hideous caricature of some aged, Old World countess-courtesan of the distant past. Even her low-cut gown was fashioned in the salacious style of another time and continent. But it was the face that held Molly's attention the longest—a once-beautiful, aristocratic cat-mask of primordial evil.

"Dost have queries, Mistress?" asked the Gypsy of Molly in a depraved wheeze.

"Many." She felt that she was hurtling headlong, faster and faster, into an undreamed world of grotesque dimensions. She grasped the light pole to keep from falling to her knees. "Many questions!"

The servant folded his withered claws upon the knob of the walking stick and regarded her with approval. "Soon thou shalt know. Thy highborn clan hast myriad foes, my lady. A few suspect, so that the babes be hidden at their birth. 'Tis wise the grand design be shut to thee a little space more."

With the same archaic bow he had given on approaching her, the Gypsy placed his cap on his silvery head and stepped into the gutter. His walking stick struck the asphalt silently as he returned to the brougham. The crone put a jeweled lorgnette to her devil's eyes and gazed at Molly in awful love. Abruptly such overwhelming joy surged through Molly's throbbing veins that she felt she had perished, had been reborn again.

"Patience," the old man hissed as he got behind the steering wheel. "Thy folk shall come for thee, and soon."

The antiquated automobile crawled down the street without noise. In a few moments it was gone, moving slowly into the clouded heart of the slums.

* * *

When Tom Dixon pulled his car up to the curb thirty minutes later, Molly was still standing by the light post, peering in the direction of the unusually hushed Little Balkans district. He opened the door for her gruffly, so irate that he could barely bring himself to speak.

"Good time?" he sneered.

Molly stared, fascinated, at the hot, swift blood churning in an artery of his slender throat. "A very good time," she said.

THE END

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(*Continued from page 37*)

blinding glare. For a moment, the terrible face was covered, mercifully concealed, but then the arms came down, and Louisa saw the face in every shocking detail.

It was the face of an animated corpse, a skull covered with thin gray skin, the face of a dead man kept alive by unnatural fire; and it was the face of her husband.

She screamed, and screamed again when the figure came closer, its deformed legs moving carblike, its bony fingers dangling from sleeves made hollow by fleshless arms. The mouth gaped open, black and toothless, and there were intelligible sounds coming from the thin throat.

"Louisa! Louisa!" the thing was saying.

Instinctively, she pushed the light button again to blot out the sight of the advancing horror, but the darkness she created was suddenly more terrifying than the light. She clambered out of the car and broke for the doorway, but the wasted arms of her husband caught her and held tight in a bony, unbreakable embrace.

"Louisa! Help me, help me!"

"Don't touch me! Oh, God, Victor, please don't touch me!"

"You must help me!" the voice pleaded. "I know where the key is—I know—"

"Victor, I beg you—"

"You've got to help me! My strength is going, Louisa, I can't lift the lid—"

"The *lid?*"

"Yes!" Victor said. "Don't you see? Francesca didn't hide the key. *She took it to her grave.* There was a portrait in one of the upstairs bedrooms, a portrait of Francesca, finely detailed—it showed a small hinge on the cross Francesca wore—the cross that was buried with her—"

Louisa was numbed, too steeped in horror to shiver at fresh ones.

"You're opening her coffin? Francesca's coffin—"

"You must help me! I'm dying, Louisa! Can't you see?"

Pity stirred her.

"All right, Victor," she said. "I'll help you."

SHE followed the shriveled, limping figure to the mausoleum.

She looked down at the coffin, so recently closed, and prayed that her act wouldn't be considered desecration. Then she lifted the lid.

Victor pushed her aside, and a moment later, cried out.

"It's here, it's here! I've beaten her, Louisa!" He laughed, leaning against the coffin weakly, shaking with laughter. "She thought she'd fool me, but she couldn't . . . I've beaten her—"

Then his skeleton's hand was on her arm.

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"Come on," he said. "Come with me, Louisa."

"No, Victor. I can't stand any more—I can't—"

"We must go to the cellars! You'll have to help me again, Louisa, the wheel is heavy—I'll need you—"

"Don't make me go with you, please!"

"The elixir is there, Louisa! Life eternal! For both of us—"

There was still strength in him, despite his protestations of weakness. He pulled her along, and she stumbled after him, back to the castle.

They went down the sloping stone ramps, down past the glowing string of naked light bulbs, past the stone blocks glistening with moisture. Then they were in the darkened chamber where only candles could light their way.

The shrunken, corpse-like figure paused at the entrance, leaning against the doorway crookedly, struggling for breath.

"Hurry," he said. "Hurry, my darling . . ."

The endearment was more chilling than the damp air of the dungeon. But she went inside the square, low-roofed chamber, and put her hands on the spoked wheel that operated the chained pulley. At Victor's command, she began to turn it.

The great stone door began to rise.

Victor moaned softly, suffering the pains of suspense. Then he staggered towards the small iron door set into the stone of the innermost chamber. He lifted the key in the air, like a triumphant banner. Then his legs crumpled beneath him and he fell, not three feet from the door.

"Louisa," he whispered.

Her hands were still on the wheel; she didn't move.

"Louisa, help me!"

He groaned; his skeletal hands scratched at the rough surface of the floor. Then slowly, he lifted himself upon his knees, thrust his body forward until he touched the iron of the door.

The key was in the lock.

He whimpered, and his bony fingers shook with the effort; and finally, the door was opened.

From the mouth of the silver chalice, the elixir of Adriani seemed to emit a pale blue aurora. At the sight of it, the death's head that was now Victor Adriani took on an expression that was almost beatific.

"You see?" his voice said, as if from a great distance. "It's the elixir, darling . . . the true elixir . . ." He reached for the tiny silver cup. "We can live forever, darling, just you and I . . ."

He dipped the cup into the chalice, and held it towards her. The death's head grinned in invitation.

"Together," he said. "For always."

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Louisa did the only possible thing.

She turned the wheel, turned it swiftly in the wrong direction, turned the wheel and lowered the stone door that enclosed the inner chamber, closed the door that shut it off from the world, and the sight of mortal men, forever.

Tom Sedgeman listened to Louisa's story, and was silent for a long moment after its conclusion.

Then he said:

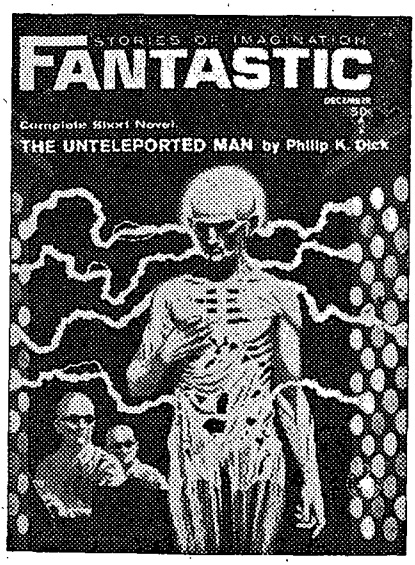
"But what you're saying isn't possible, Louisa. If it happened the way you tell it—I mean, I'm not doubting you—but that was twelve years ago—"

"Yes," she said flatly. "Twelve years ago. But Victor was imprisoned behind that door with his precious elixir. He didn't need food or drink, as long as he had the elixir. The flesh could waste off his bones, but he would live."

"Then you don't think it's the Contessa—"

"No! It's Victor who knocks! It's Victor!" Louisa covered her face with her hands. "And—oh, God! What if someday—somebody—answers?"

THE END



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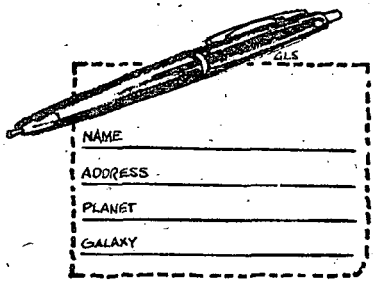

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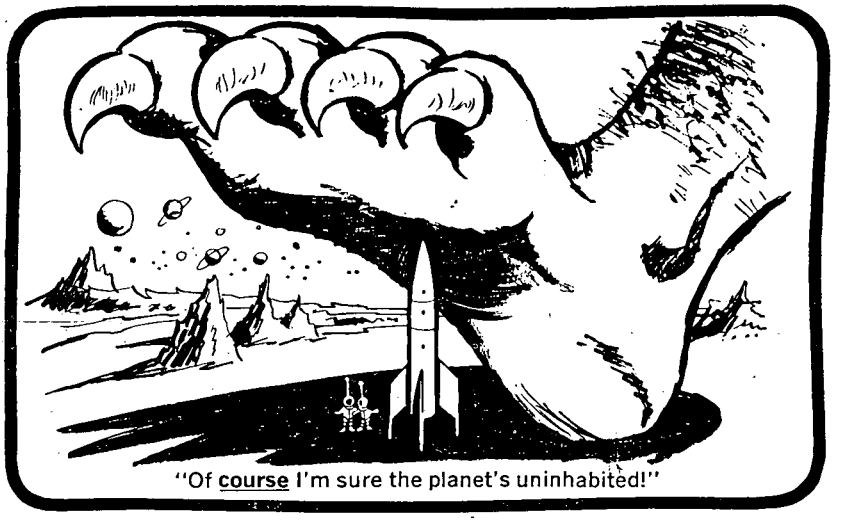

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